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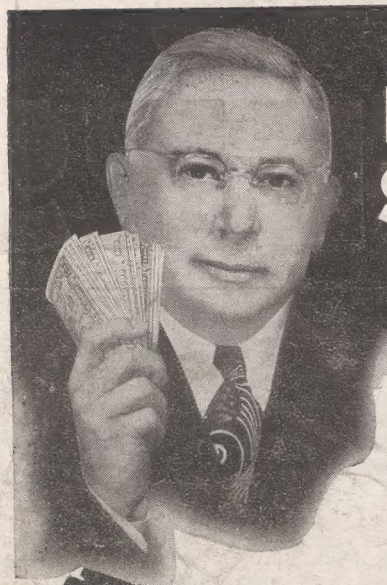

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Vol. 50, No. 1 MARCH, 1953

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

THE SWORD OF AMONTILLO.....Jackson Cole 10

The Lone Wolf doubted that the bright, shining blade of this most famous sword could combat so many guns—and he was both right and wrong!

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Blue Sawyer knew the man on his trail meant to kill him—but when he had a chance to get rid of the man for good, he faced a tough decision

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Monte had the choice—friendship or vengeance!

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The marshal wasn't ready to call the case closed

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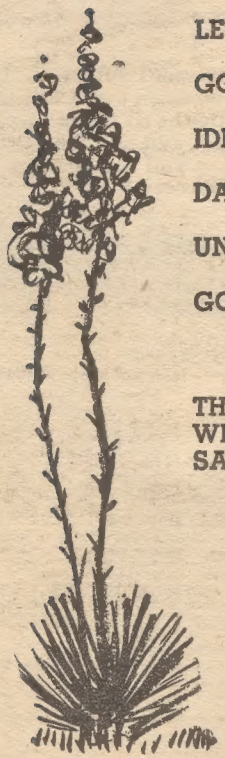
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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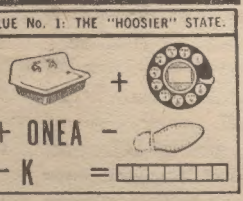
CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE.



You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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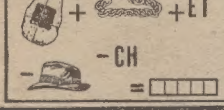
CLUE No. 1: THE "PINE TREE" STATE.



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Too Much of a Good Thing

A TREMENDOUSLY important political issue these days is the conflict of centralized government versus states rights. It is not a new problem. It started about 1200 A.D.

At that time there came into power in southern Italy an ambitious young king named Frederick II. He hit upon what he thought was a solution to the evils of feudalism.

So Freddy got busy conquering castle baronies and founded a nation, Italy of the Middle Ages. Nationalism spread throughout Europe. Unfortunately, though, it did not do away with the wrongs Fred No. 2 set out to correct. There followed greater oppression, more ruinous wars, until today the great powers of the world are spending from 20 to 50 percent of their national income and resources in a determined endeavor to kill off the people of other nations. Or, as in the case of our United States, to prevent other people from destroying or annexing us.

Pro and Con

Now you are probably wondering what all this has to do with the price of horseshoe nails. Well, folks from Texas west who balk at the power of centralized government are raising a holler because Washington owns and controls more than half of the total land area of the 11 Western states.

The proportion is as follows:

Nevada is 87% federally owned, Arizona, 73%, California, 46%, Utah, 72%, Oregon, 53%, Idaho, 64%, Wyoming, 51%, New Mexico, 44%, Colorado, 38%, Montana and Washington, 35%.

Is that good or bad? It's good, most men say, where Uncle Sam carries out great projects beyond the reach of local governments. Without the policies of national government, we wouldn't have a U. S. Forest Service or our National Parks. Also, local communities could not afford such huge and beneficial enterprises as great dams, power and irrigation development and costly highways.

On the other hand, here are some of the objections to excessive nationalism:

Some 60 federal agencies handle this immense domain of real estate. In many instances there is frightful waste when rival agencies and bureaus overlap and duplicate or undo one another's efforts.

Another kick is that federal lands are in most cases untaxable by local or state authorities. Whatever profit they yield pours into the U. S. Treasury, thus strengthening the hold of federalism.

You can go on from there, figuring out the rights and wrongs of centralized government versus states rights, according to your own belief and inclinations. In the meantime, let's switch to a more cheerful Western topic.

Maybe the word "Winchester" hasn't a cheerful ring to it, even if it is the world's most famous name in firearms.

But of good cheer to the Winchester family was the great fortune amassed by the maker, so that his widow, the late Sarah L. Winchester, was able to indulge in some odd whims without regard for cost.

Strange Castle

One of these was to build the world's largest, strangest dwelling. It is in California's Santa Clara Valley, four miles west of the city of San Jose, south of Frisco.

This wonder house has become a museum and showplace, open to the public. It was under construction for 36 years, and then not finished. The Winchester house con-

tains 160 rooms, 47 fireplaces, 40 stairways, three elevators, 13 bathrooms, many art windows that cost more than $1000 apiece. Some of the hundreds of doors are inlaid with gold, silver and bronze, each one worth the price of a fine new automobile. Nobody knows how many millions were spent. There are mysterious secret passageways, doors that open onto blank walls, and staircases that lead nowhere. This eccentric splurge in home building produced a result about as cozy as one of the feudal castles Frederick II knocked over with battering rams. It covers six acres.

Just what Widow Winchester's intentions were, nobody seems to know.

No Limits

Now a few words about fish and fishing which is plenty cheerful for fishermen. Me, I'm always interested, often indignant and sometimes amused by the rules set up by so-called "conservationists" of wildlife. My own dimwitted opinion is that in a lot of cases, gamefish and game animals would be more numerous and better off without cock-eyed conservation.

What I'm getting at is this:

The tendency for years has been to "protect" creatures of the wild, and as various species became scarcer, the tendency was to shorten the season and reduce the bag limit. But now, according to an outfit called the Sport Fishing Institute, we had the wrong dope altogether.

We now hear that the modern way to increase the fish population, and make 'em grow bigger, is to do away with any and all such restrictions.

The new scientific thesis is that fish are just too blamed prolific for their own good. A wall-eyed pike, for instance, thinks nothing of producing 50,000 offspring per season. Bluegills and bass produce 5000 to 25,000 babies every year.

So why check-rein fishermen, when fish overdo the job of restocking? The sportsmanlike thing to do is to help them relieve an overcrowded situation and go fishing every day.

I'm told that Ohio already has thrown down the bars. No closed seasons, no creel or size limits. Other states plan to do likewise.

Cheerful, huh? Except for the jobless game wardens.

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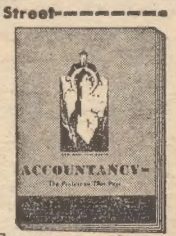

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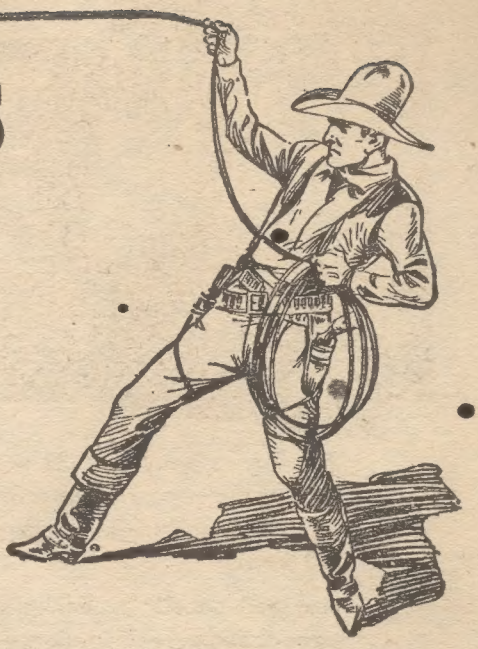


A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

The walls of a giant Southwest cactus plant are pleated like an accordion, allowing them to expand and accommodate any amount of water available.

The famed cowboy humorist, Will Rogers, kept a stuffed calf in the living room of his home. He used to practice roping the animal whenever the mood took him. There are some housewives we know who might not even like a stuffed calf in their living rooms. Which just goes to prove, I suppose, that there are all kinds of people.

Story making the rounds: At last a Texan has been found who doesn't think Texas is the largest state. He thinks it's the smallest continent.

Don't fret too much about it, but the Grand Canyon of the Colorado is in Arizona, and the Grand Canyon of the Arkansas is in Colorado. And up is down, etc.

Temperamental Hollywood stars are not exactly a novelty, but one display of temperament by a star the other day caused some 50 actors, electricians and other workers to scamper upstairs and jump through windows. Roy Rogers' horse, Trigger, was the star involved. The famed horse became frightened during one scene of a new movie he was making and bolted wildly about the set. A rope-throwing wrangler finally quieted the horse—and everyone else.

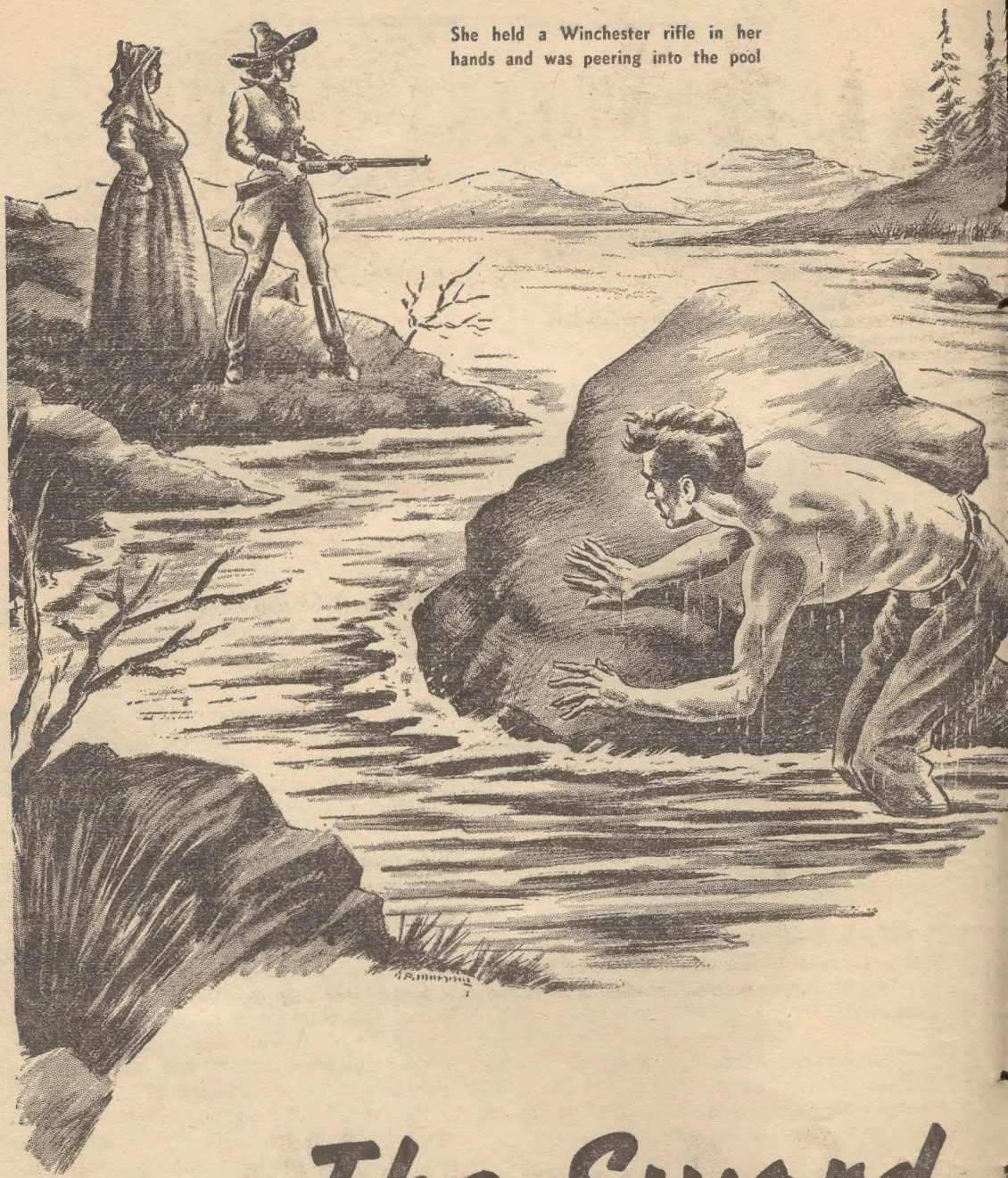
When a relief column of U. S. cavalrymen reached the Little Bighorn in June, 1876, the only thing left alive of General Custer's entire outfit was a buckskin horse named Comanche—and he was wounded.

A New Mexico law permits a wife to go through her husband's pockets at her pleasure. Perhaps this accounts for the somewhat meager population in that state.

The teacher at a Hollywood studio was telling the children a story about the discovery of America. She concluded with, "Now, children, aren't you all glad that Columbus discovered America?"

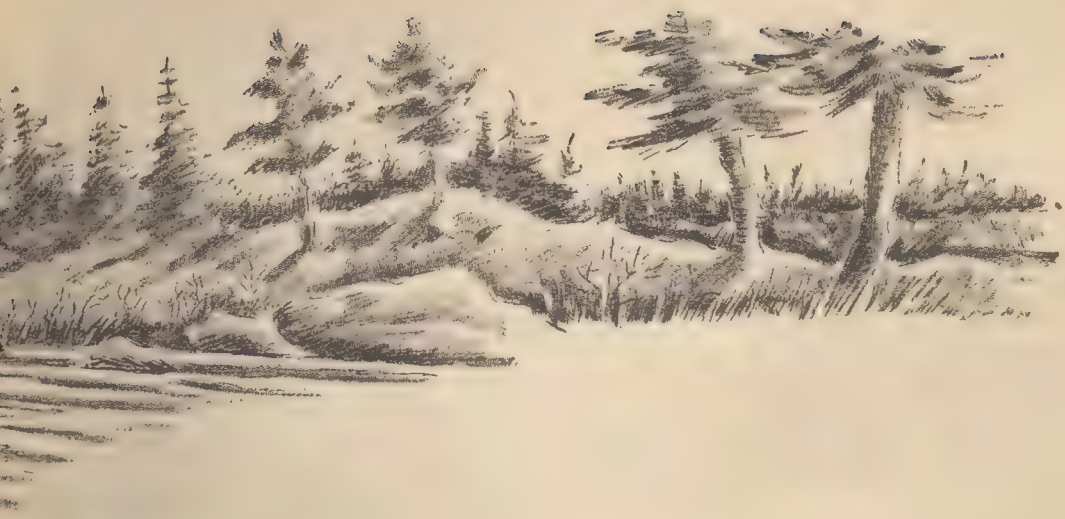
"Not me," said the little boy who is playing in the new Western movie, "Pony Boy." He was Anthony Numkena, nine years old, the son of a Klamath Indian father and a Hopi Indian mother.

When all the badmen in Kimble County, Texas, were rounded up in 1877 there were not enough honest people left to form a jury. Even the judge and sheriff had been indicted. Ah, these Texans. . . .



She held a Winchester rifle in her hands and was peering into the pool

The Sword



The Lone Wolf doubted that the bright shining blade of this famous sword could combat so many guns—and he was both right and wrong

CHAPTER I

Death On Apache Trail

THE MORNING SUN ran hot probing fingers along the Apache Barrier, outlining that sheer, forbidding wall that for eighty unbroken miles effectively sealed off this section of border Texas and the approaches to the Gulf of Mexico. Curving in a colossal crescent of earth and stone, this mighty

# of Amontillo

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

barrier could be penetrated only at one point—a narrow, dangerous trail that along one section clung for more than a mile along the sheer sides of a deep gorge.

This entrance point was the beginning of the Apache Trail into Mexico. But the early Spaniards, in the days when Texas and the lands beyond had been known to the King of Spain only as "the northern provinces," had designated this perilous passage *"Via de la Muerte"*—the Way of Death!

Along this trail this mid-morning came a man on a beautiful black gelding. He was a slim, small-boned man in his early twenties. The unmistakable stamp of Spanish ancestry was in his dark, finely sensitive face. He wore a charro jacket of green velvet over a white silk shirt and the bell bottom trousers of the young vaquero. A huge cream sombrero was thonged under his lean jaw.

He had reached the high point in the trail where it widened and lifted above the dark gorge which he had just traversed, and this was his last chance to glimpse the valley he was leaving. He pulled the black aside, quickly dismounted, and in a few moments had divested himself of jacket, shirt, trousers and sombrero.

From his cantle roll he brought out a pair of worn levis, a faded blue cotton shirt, a red neckerchief, and a soiled gray stetson which he punched into shape. A nondescript cartridge belt with scuffed leather holster and plain-handled Colt completed the change-over.

The transformation, however, was startling. The Spanish vaquero vanished with that simple change, leaving a slim-hipped, dark, hawk-visaged young man who could pass almost anywhere in Texas as a puncher riding chuckline.

With quick, nervous motions, he rolled his more gaudy clothes into a bundle, tied them around a slab of rock with a length of rawhide, and deliberately tossed the bundle into the gorge. Remounting and turning to look back, he had a moment of regret.

"It is better this way, Amigo," he muttered, patting the black's neck. He spoke a precise English, learned in American schools. "At least I will not bring dishonor to him during the fiesta."

FROM his vantage point he had a clear view of a locked-in valley stretching away to far, softly outlined hills. There was a haze in the air, the gray shimmer of heat, so that the village he knew lay in the bend of the river was not visible. He shifted his gaze to the south, and though a projection of seamed rock shut off his vision, he could visualize every detail of the flat, red-tiled roof of the rambling, adobe hacienda, the neat outbuildings, the fields where men and women even now were at work, and the corrals down by the river which penned the savage Amontillo bulls.

El Valle de los Toros—the Valley of the Bulls!

He felt his skin crinkle across his shoulders and, despite the punishing heat, a chill worked its way down his neck. His mouth had a cottony texture and his tongue drew across his lips without moistening them.

"Amigo, it is better this way," he repeated. But his face had the tortured lines of a man not fully convinced. "Let the sword of Amontillo remain on the wall of my father's living room, where it belongs. Let someone else be master of the Amontillo bulls!"

Amigo snorted softly. The small man suddenly put his head down on his forearms, his shoulders quivering. He was running away at a time when his father most needed him. Running away—yet to stay meant death in the bull ring. And dishonor.

Death, young Ortega Amontillo might have faced. But not dishonor and death in the coming *corrida*, with the proud traditions of the Amontillos hanging over him like a crushing weight. With all of Amontillo Acres depending on his performance as a *matador* during the highlight of the fiesta soon to be held in the Valley of the Bulls.

Down past the far bend of the ledge trail, coming up from the valley, appeared

two riders. Young Amontillo roused himself, a small, tight smile curling his lips.

"Farnum Gray wishes to make sure, Amigo. He's going to win Amontillo Acres by default. But still he sends his gunmen. Ah, well—once down on the flatlands we'll show them a pair of heels, eh, Amigo?"

Amigo snorted his definite assurance.

They swung up onto the wider trail. A quarter of a mile beyond, the ochre cliffs had completely shut off view of the Valley of the Bulls. The trail dropped now in a

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

series of switchbacks down the face of the barrier to the gullied, treacherous flatlands below.

Ortega had come this way once before, and it had been at the back of his mind then, he realized, that one day he would be running away from Amontillo Acres.

A rider popped up on the trail ahead of him. Looking into the distance and not expecting anyone to be within twenty miles in this direction, young Ortega was startled. He dropped his hand to his Colt.

The muzzle of a .45 in the hand of the strange rider made a magic appearance over the golden sorrel's left ear, gluing Ortega's fingers to his gun butt.

"I wouldn't be hasty, young feller," the stranger advised. He had a deep, quiet voice that somewhere in it had an easy chuckle. It was a voice as definite as the man's eyes were strange. Greenish eyes that seemed to look into Ortega, see through him.

Young Amontillo felt his ears burn. "Sorry," he apologized, bringing his empty hand up to join the other on the pommel. "Not in ten years has a traveler come to the Valley of the Bulls by this most difficult passage."

The stranger grinned. He was a tall man who sat straight in his saddle, although the signs of a long and dusty journey were there to see. Sun and wind and weather had darkened that strong face, and a thousand encounters had shaped it. But character had molded it, so that Ortega sensed a hardness tempered by compassion.

"The Valley of the Bulls!" the stranger said, patting his magnificent golden sorrel's arched neck. "Did you hear that, Goldy? We've come to the right place."

ORTEGA'S eyes darkened. He thought helplessly, Another one. Another gun for Farnum Gray!

And he felt the back of his hands sweat in the hot sun, and felt ashamed that he was running away.

Then he recalled the hardcases even now on his back trail, and a premonition of what could transpire on the narrow ledge trail behind him lightened his eyes with bitter irony.

"Buenas dias, Señor," he said gravely. He edged Amigo around that golden horse and murmured, *"Vaya con Dios!"* He reckoned that this man might need it. . . .

Ranger Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf, watched him ride out of sight. "Looks like that young hombre's running from something, Goldy," he commented idly.

Goldy tossed his head. The stiff climb had barely told on that magnificent animal.

Hatfield grinned briefly. Remembering his mission, he slid his hand into his pocket and brought out a gold coin the size of a silver dollar. And even now, with a week's hard riding behind him, this gold coin with the figure of a fighting bull exquisitively carved on its face, served to bring him back to headquarters, watching his commanding officer, Ranger Captain Bill McDowell, slide that coin across his desk to him.

"A long time ago, Jim," McDowell was saying, "I trailed a man across the Apache Barrier, down into a place called the Valley of the Bulls. I was pretty green then, and too sure of myself—and this man put a slug into me. He left me for dead, just below that trail, and it was Don Felipe Amontillo himself who found me, brought me to his home, and got me back on my feet."

McDowell had settled back. "I told Don Felipe then that if he ever needed Ranger help, I'd see that he got it as fast as I could manage it. That was more than ten years ago, Jim. I've never been back that way since."

He pointed a gnarled forefinger at the coin. "The Amontillos are an old family in Texas—and a proud one. That coin came to me in the mail with one short line of greeting. Don Felipe wrote, 'May this find you in the best of health.' But I know what that coin means, Jim. Felipe Amontillo's in trouble. And I can't think of a better man to send him than you."

A gold coin with the figure of a fighting bull — and a Ranger debt. Hatfield shrugged. He had followed many strange trails since that first day he had been sworn in.

He heeled Goldy lightly. The sorrel moved along the narrowing trail, and soon they came to the beginning of the ledge passage. Jim frowned. The red walls went up, hot and crumbly, for a hundred feet above the trail, but the drop into the gorge was at least five hundred.

The man he had met a few minutes before must have come this way, he thought grimly. But he understood now McDowell's parting warning:

"If you take the Apache Trail you'll cut out three days' travel. But it's a hell of a trail, and if someone's got wind of your coming, there'd be no better place to stop you!"

The lips of the man whom the Ranger captain long ago had dubbed The Lone Wolf, crinkled wryly. McDowell's words had been an understatement.

Goldy was as surefooted as a mountain goat, but the big stallion took that trail carefully, stepping lightly. For two hundred yards they followed the trail around the face of the red wall. Then a jut of rock, cutting off view ahead, narrowed the way even further, and Hatfield decided both he and Goldy would do better if he dismounted and led the sorrel around the face of that rock bulge.

He eased out of saddle. Standing beside Goldy, there was less than six inches between his heels and empty space—and it was then that he heard the ring of shod hoofs somewhere ahead.

He frowned. He had hardly expected this dangerous trail to be so heavily used, and as he glanced back along the way he had come he saw that backtracking with Goldy would present a ticklish problem.

Taking the sorrel's reins, he edged forward.

JUST beyond the bulge the ledge trail cut sharply in against the cliff face where some ancient fall had left a wider shelf rock. It was thirty yards to the shelf, and half that distance to the bulge that blotted out the trail ahead.

"Come, Goldy," Jim growled. "We better make that wide spot in the trail before whoever is up ahead of us."

He didn't make it. A burly man rounded the rock bulge, leading a tired gray mare. He saw Jim and pulled up short, facing the Ranger across sixty feet of sheer space. A slim, sallow-faced man showed up behind him, riding a nervous bay horse.

The slim man said, "We got company, Bremmer."

The broad man scowled. He quickened his pace and made the wide point in the trail and waited for his companion to

join him. The sweat on his forehead glistened in the sun.

He waited, a truculent scowl on his face. He wore two guns, while his companion was armed only with one, a walnut-handled Peacemaker. But to the Lone Wolf's experienced eye he judged the sallow-faced man to be the more dangerous.

He considered the situation. There was enough room at the shelf to allow him passage, if both men and animals squeezed in against the cliff. He gave a light tug to his reins and started forward.

"Hold it!" the burly man snapped. "This trail's for one way traffic — and yo're headed the wrong way!"

Hatfield shook his head. "It's better'n two hundred yards behind me, and my cayuse would have to back all the way. I think I can get past you there, if you crowd your animals against the wall."

Bremmer's eyes widened in mock surprise. "Well, hear him, Milo! He's telling us to crowd against the cliff so's he can get by!" He kept his glance on Hatfield. "We're losing time," he said coldly to his companion. "The kid'll be out of sight if we lose more of it."

Bremmer swung around to the stranger. "All right, feller!" he growled. "Backtrack!"

Hatfield said grimly, "You have the wide spot, so I won't argue. Let's toss for it. Heads you let me by, tails I'll backtrack!"

Bremmer shook his bullet head. "You'll backtrack anyhow!" he snarled.

Milo's cold voice overruled him. "Toss him, Bremmer."

The burly man snapped a quick look at his companion, caught the meaning flicker in the man's pale eyes. He faced Jim, shrugging sullenly. "Toss," he growled impatiently. "We're in a hurry."

Jim Hatfield took in the situation. The sullen-faced Milo was slouched forward, his right hand resting lightly on his saddle a few inches from his gun butt. Bremmer was shuffling to meet him, a heavily-muscled, surly man who would have made a lousy poker player, Jim reflected grimly. The man had no intention of abiding by the toss of a coin.

Hatfield reached into his pocket for a half-dollar. He held it in his palm until Bremmer came up, and at the man's curt nod flicked the coin into the air. He caught it, opened his palm.

"Heads," he announced calmly.

Bremmer said, "Let me see," and put out his hand. Then he lunged forward, his fingers reaching for Hatfield's arm, intending to pull him around and off the ledge.

There was no room to maneuver on that narrow trail. The Ranger's fingers closed on the man's hairy wrist and he yanked downward. Bremmer stumbled forward and Hatfield shouldered him hard. The impact whirled Bremmer around and he fell backward off the ledge. He gave out one short, horrible scream.

Milo was drawing even as Bremmer's cry began. Smoke wreathed the Lone Wolf's hip. His first slug ripped Milo's Colt from its holster, the second smashed the sallow man's arm.

Milo made a grab for his saddle-horn with his good hand as his bay, frightened by the shots, crowded into Bremmer's gray. The mare lunged nervously. There was a snorting tangle, then the bay lost its footing and fell backward off the trail.

Bremmer had screamed as he fell. Milo dropped without a sound.

FOR seconds after the abrupt tragedy the Ranger stood still, a thin dribble of smoke issuing from his Colt. On the shelf the gray mare was still quivering.

A shadow floated down from the opposite wall of the gorge, dipped in toward the ledge trail, then made a wide, climbing circle into the sky. It was joined by another. For a moment they hovered above the dark cleft, then the desert scavengers dropped in a long, ominous glide for the canyon bottom.

Jim Hatfield slowly holstered his Colt. He thought grimly, Looks like the hospitality around here's a bit sour.

He led Goldy to the wide shelf, had a ticklish moment leading the sorrel past

the still nervous mare. Then he paused. He couldn't leave Bremmer's mount here, and he doubted if the frightened cayuse, left to herself, would attempt the ledge trail back.

He went back to the mare. The Lone Wolf had a soothing voice and a way with animals. In a few moments the mare was plodding along behind Goldy.

The trail finally cut away from the gorge, climbing to the summit of the cliffs. Hatfield turned the animal loose.

Far down in that valley a bell was tolling, the sound carrying to Hatfield in faint vibrations. It was a peaceful sound, sleepily unhurried, and it suggested an untroubled way of life, of *mañana* and fiesta and the soft music of guitars.

There was in that faint tolling no hint of guns—and death!

CHAPTER II

Wanted—a Town Marshal

NUEVA VALENCIA sprawled in a wide bend of Bull Creek, a geometrically square cluster of adobe houses, many of them several stories high, and clinging stubbornly to Old Word architecture with their wrought-iron balconies and high enclosing walls.

Nueva Valencia, despite its name, was old—and the atmosphere of *mañana* infused it. There was a sedateness in the seraped figures moving along the streets that jarred with the arrival of every hard-riding stranger who clattered along the cobbled streets.

Two structures dominated the town and its people. The first, located on the plaza in the middle of the village, was the mission of San Marcos. The other was a huge, circular amphitheatre, its high adobe walls facing the *Avenida de los Toros*. This was the bull ring where for more than a hundred years the Amontillos had kept alive the spirit and the temper of their ancestor, Don Carlos Amontillo, one time foremost *matador* of all Spain.

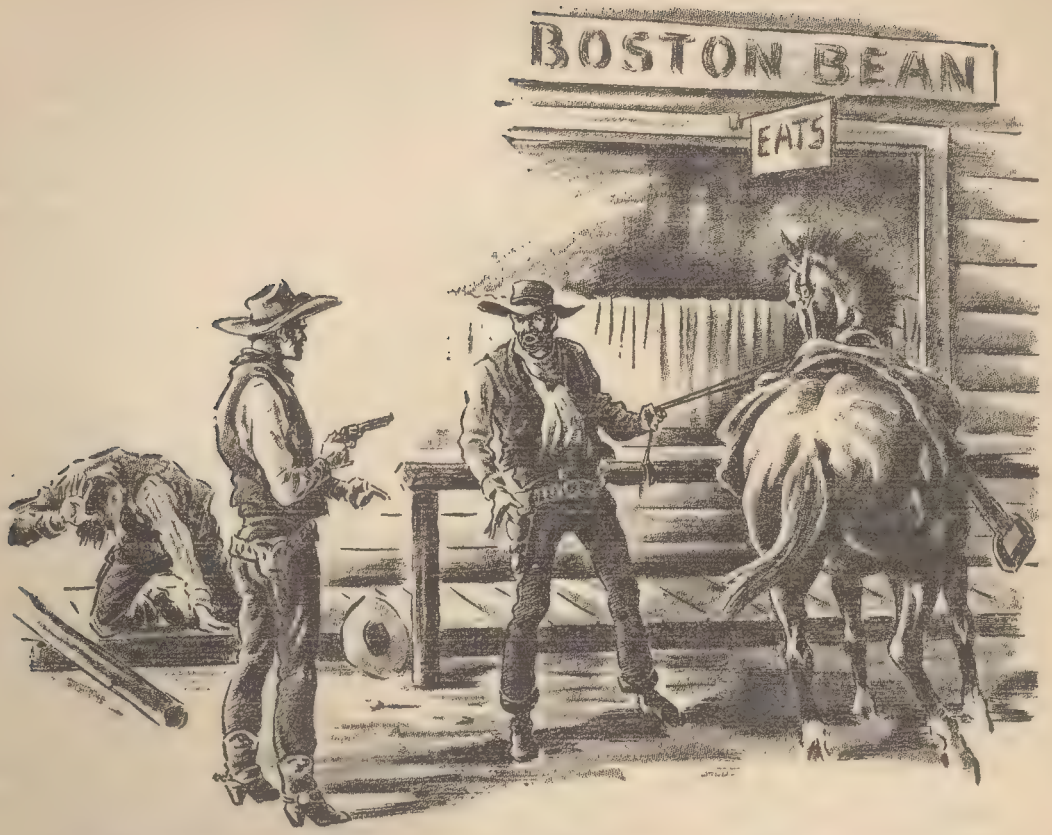
For years the Barrier had blocked the westward drive of the *Anglos*, diverting the restless men toward Santa Fe and California. Finally a few, venturesome, from a ship which had put in at a small port below the Barrier, found their way across the semi desert to this ancient valley still ruled in semi-feudal manner by the Amontillos.

The invasion had been steady after that. All kinds came to the Valley of the Bulls, many of them peaceful men who found Felipe Amontillo a considerate and a just man. Inevitably, however, they changed the tempo of Nueva Valencia and colored the ancient ways. But, until Farnum Gray had come, driving five hundred head of rangy cattle from the coast, Texans and the Amontillos had got along.

Jim Hatfield rode into town, his glance noting the infiltration that was coloring this village. Longhorn Avenue and Main Street seemed out of place, but the slack-hipped ponies nosing the rails along these two thoroughfares were a sharp reminder that Texans and cattle had come to stay.

It was along Longhorn Avenue that the procession came. Jim pulled Goldy aside to watch a buckboard with a rough, wooden coffin, a sour-faced driver and two thin-lipped horsemen go by. A round-faced *padre* in a long black robe, his rosary of black beads hanging to his waist, and a half dozen playful children formed a not-too-solemn cortege behind the buckboard.

Hatfield waited until the strange procession had passed. Then he rode on. Longhorn Avenue became Via Don Carlos on the other side of Main Street which bisected the cobbled street at the corner. Main Street and Longhorn Avenue had been completely taken over by the newer element which had infiltrated during the past ten years. And it occurred to the Ranger that Nueva Valencia did not take kindly to this sort of invasion, which no doubt accounted for the lanky, hard-faced man with the deputy's star on his black vest who sat in a tilted-back chair against the side of a building designated "Sheriff's Office."



"Next time you want a close look at a horse," said Jim, "be sure you get the owner's permission!"

The deputy had a long, sad face and a thin slice of nose under which a stringy brown mustache drooped mournfully. He came to his feet, uncoiling more than six feet of bony frame, and hooked his thumb casually into his belt as the Ranger swung Goldy toward the office.

"I'm tired of sleeping on a blanket," Hatfield said cheerfully. "Where would I find me a bed with a real mattress?"

The deputy ran watery blue eyes up and down the Ranger. Then he ran his forefinger along the side of his nose. "You work for the Three Spades?" he asked.

The name brought back to the Lone Wolf the brand he had casually noted on the gray mare he had turned loose that morning. "I might consider it," he frowned, "after I get that bed."

The deputy sneered. "Gray usually picks his men. Seeing as you're a drifter, my advice will be short. Keep riding, big feller. Straight down the avenue until you hit the south trail, then keep moving!"

Hatfield thumbed his hat back off his forehead. "That," he chuckled coldly, "is what I call misguided advice, Slim." He swung Goldy away, grinning at the look on the lawman's face.

ROUNDING the corner into Main Street he pulled up before a small crowd clustered around the window of the Crystal Palace. From his saddle he saw what interested the men. Someone had block-lettered a sign and nailed it to one side of the door: It read:

WANTED—TOWN MARSHAL.
SALARY ARRANGED. PROPER FUNERAL GUARANTEED. INQUIRE WITHIN.

"Ryerson keeps his word," one man

muttered. He was a small man with a tic under his right eye. "Monte got his funeral, like it says."

The man next to him spat. "Monte was big and tough and some claimed he was rated a mighty fast gunhand up north. But hell, he didn't have a chance against Breck!"

Hatfield swung out of saddle. He was thinking that it would be a good idea to look around first, find out what was the trouble here, before contacting Amontillo. A man could learn a lot in a town like this if he talked little and kept his ears open.

The man with the tic turned as Hatfield came up. He ran a sharp glance down to the Lone Wolf's guns, then looked up into the Ranger's greenish eyes. He swallowed, his Adam's apple jerking up and down his scrawny throat.

"That job open to strangers?" Hatfield asked.

"It sure is," the small man said, edging away. "And you're sure welcome to it, feller."

Jim went up the steps, pulled the cardboard sign down from the wall, and pushed through the batwings.

The interior of the Crystal Palace was dim and cool. He walked to the bar where a bony man with an exaggerated mustache, long burnsides, and a pink-striped silk shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, was wiping glasses. Three girl entertainers, judging by their dress and paint jobs, were smiling over beer at the far end of the counter.

Hatfield dropped the ad on the bar in front of the bartender. "You do the hiring?"

The man dropped his glance down Jim's dusty frame and raised it with no change of expression. "Rear door," he said laconically. "Take the sign with you."

Hatfield turned. A big blonde girl at the bar end looked at him, smiling welcome. He smiled back, but continued on to the rear door, rapped his knuckles on the panel, and went in.

The office had a quiet sedateness into which the man behind the mahogany desk fitted. He was a slender, scholarly-looking man of thirty, well-dressed, and wearing gold-rimmed spectacles. He had his feet propped up on the desk, however, and was reading the *Farmer's Almanac,* and he did not immediately take his attention from the book.

The Ranger closed the door behind him and walked to the desk. He dropped the sign on the desk. "I'm applying for the job," he said quietly.

The man behind the desk raised his eyes. They were blue eyes, cold and direct, and the spectacles seemed out of place. For a bare instant they widened, and a strange light glowed and faded in their depths. Then he dropped his glance in casual survey of the Ranger, and when his eyes again met the Lone Wolf's they held a sort of amused calculation.

"You're big enough," he said. He had a soft, gentle sort of voice. He reached inside a desk drawer and tossed a marshal's badge on the desk. "But so was the last man." He dropped his feet to the floor and sighed softly.

"According to the almanac," he commented irrelevantly, "we should be in the midst of a cloud-burst." His soft, controlled voice had the quality of chilled steel sliding back and forth in an oiled scabbard. "However, we haven't had a drop of rain in twenty days." He got to his feet and held out a limp hand. "Name's Conrad Ryerson. I own the Crystal Palace—and I like this town. I like the people who've been here long before a lot of gents like you and me drifted in to make trouble. That explain something to you, fellow?"

HATFIELD picked up the badge and held it in his palm. It was a cheap piece of nickeled metal. But it was also a symbol—a symbol of law and order, something by which men lived and gave their lives so that other men and women could lead theirs in peace and decency.

But there was something in this soft-spoken, scholarly-looking man that didn't ring true. That somehow cheapened the symbol Jim held in his palm. Behind this

man's quiet gentility the Lone Wolf sensed a deadliness as certain as the bite of a copperhead.

"I'm a stranger in town," Hatfield answered drily. "Rode in a few minutes ago Need money, and"—he hesitated a moment—"wearing a badge seems like a good way of earning it."

Again the other man's eyes flickered, and a small smile built around the hard lips. "You wear a badge before?"

"That," Jim Hatfield replied evenly, "is what I call a leading question." He pointed down at the ad. "I didn't read anything in that about references, or past history."

Ryerson chuckled. "The job's yours," he said. "You have a name, I imagine? Something you go by?" He laughed this time, a quiet, hidden laugh that seemed occasioned by some private thought.

Hatfield frowned. He had the disconcerting feeling that he was fencing with this man, countering something he couldn't put his finger on. "Sure," he answered casually. "Call me Texas."

Ryerson straightened. For just a moment his eyes sobered, then the cool smile came back to his lips. "You take in a lot of territory, Texas. But I reckon it fits you, at that."

He pushed back in his chair and reached inside a desk drawer. The Ranger caught a glimpse of two guns snugged in holsters thonged down on his hips. Ryerson placed two clean glasses on the desk and poured from a bonded bottle of rye.

"Drink on it, Texas?"

Hatfield picked up his glass. "We haven't talked money, yet," he pointed out. "I'm not worying about the funeral part."

Ryerson nodded. "I've got a feeling you'll be around awhile, too." He raised his glass. "Two hundred a month, all the liquor you can hold at the bar, a room upstairs. You eat out. That suit you?"

Hatfield slid the badge into his pocket. "You'll save money on the liquor." he said shortly.

Ryerson finished his drink and set the glass down. "A shyster lawyer named Farnum Gray, trying to be a rancher, runs the Three Spades outfit, out in Mesquite Basin. He's squatting on Amontillo Acres and, from the looks of things, he's planning to take over. This valley has belonged to the Amontillos for more than a hundred years. Don Felipe's got a land grant to back him up—but Gray's got more guns." Ryerson took off his spectacles and pointed to Hatfield with them. "Like I said, I happen to like the Amontillos. I like this town. I want you to keep order here, even if you have to break a few heads to do it."

Hatfield shrugged. "I rode past the sheriff's office on Longhorn Avenue," he said. "Beanpole deputy sitting out front. Where does he stand?"

Ryerson smiled. "Sad Peebles is Gray's man. So's the sheriff, Sol Breck." He put his spectacles on again. "They'll be your problem, Texas."

"I see." Jim Hatfield nodded. He finished his rye.

"By the way," Ryerson added quietly, "both Peebles and Sol Breck are wanted up in Idaho. Breck's got a mean reputation. He's fast. Cross draw man."

Hatfield waited, smiling faintly. Ryerson took off his glasses again and wiped the lenses with a clean handkerchief. "Only one man in town Breck can't outdraw, Texas. Maybe two."

"Yeah?"

"Me," Ryerson said softly, still smiling. "And you, Marshal. . . ."

THE Lone Wolf paused on the steps of the Crystal Palace and looked down the cobbled street. The group had dissipated. From where he stood the top of the mission was visible. The bell in the belfry was still.

A block down and across the street was a lunchroom. Jim stepped down, patted Goldy, and headed for the lunchroom with the odd name for a Spanish town. "The Boston Bean." The sorrel trailed patiently behind.

It was mid-afternoon and the lunchroom was not crowded. A man sat on the end stool, picking at a piece of apple pie

and reading a thick, leather bound volume propped against two coffee mugs.

Hatfield ran his knuckles across the bristle on his chin. This town, he reflected drily, was literate.

He sat down next to the man, and his casual glance noticed that the book was titled *Gray's Anatomy*. A weighty and technical tome for anyone to be reading!

The counterman was in his late forties, a slow, deliberate man with a mouth pinched tight. He was a spare-framed man, and he was meager with his conversation. He looked at Hatfield, said: "Yep?"

The Ranger ran his eye over the penciled menu tacked behind the counter. "Steak and kidney pie," he read. "Sounds good."

The man with the book looked around. He was a young man, in his middle twenties. He had a thin, ascetic face burned brown from the sun. His eyes were gray and serious. He seemed a sober young man, dressed in neat gray suit, and Hatfield momentarily expected to see him place spectacles on his nose.

"It is good," the reader stated. Then, as his glance took in the customer's appearance, some of the friendliness went out of his voice. "You ever been East?"

"Far as St. Louis," Hatfield replied levelly.

The young fellow pinched his lips wryly. He looked down at Hatfield's guns. "Wear those for amusement—or business?"

The Ranger's eyes leveled on the questioner with frosty hardness. "Both," he answered bleakly.

The young man smiled gravely. "No offense, stranger. My name's Roger Amherst. Folks around town call me Doc. Boston was my home town a little over two years ago."

"That explains the literature," Hatfield said, a twinkle breaking through the hardness in his eyes. "But why here? An odd spot for a Boston man to practice medicine."

Some old hurt made its shadow play across Amherst's face. "Was headed for 'Frisco by way of Cape Horn when the ship put in at Rondos, small coast port forty miles from here. Heard about the Valley of the Bulls, and having time on my hands, came up. Liked it, and stayed." He glanced at the counterman who was coming with the Ranger's order. "Ephraim and I are the only Yankees in the valley."

Hatfield shrugged. He was hungry, and he found the steak and kidney pie good. Amherst went back to his book. Ephraim brought "Doc" another cup of coffee and he finished his pie about the time Hatfield got through.

"You ride for the Three Spades?" he asked.

Hatfield shook his head. "I've got a job."

Dr. Amherst frowned. "If you're not a Gray man, then you're an Amontillo rider. Though I haven't heard that Don Felipe was hiring gringos."

Hatfield grinned. He took out the badge Ryerson had given him and pinned it to his shirt. "This makes it official," he said.

Amherst coughed over his coffee. "Town marshal!" He looked down at the guns, but remained unconvinced. "You'll be the third one in two months," he observed. "Hope you last longer than the other two."

The Ranger got up. He paid for his meal. "I intend to," he said shortly. He stopped with his hand on the door. "Which way would I ride to get to the Amontillo place?"

Roger swung around. "Take Longhorn Avenue out of town and the road leads you south. Turn right at first fork." Doc's eyes had a sudden sharp look. "Why?"

"That," Jim Hatfield countered levelly, "is my business."

He was pulling the door open when he heard Goldy's high whinny and a man's rough voice:

"Hold the devil, Trask, while I—" The voice choked off.

JIM slammed the door and came out fast. He had a quick look at the setup in the street. A tow-headed gunster in range clothes was scrambling under the tie bar, getting away from the rearing sorrel, his face ashen, his hat lying in the dust.

Another rider was trying to grab Goldy's bit.

The tow-haired man didn't see Jim come down the steps. He was palming a Colt, murder in his eyes. "I'll teach that wild devil—"

Jim Hatfield reached out and yanked him off-balance. The man gave a surprised yelp and tried to bring his Colt up. Hatfield knocked it out of his hand and jammed the heel of his right hand into the gunman's face. The man slammed against the cross pole of the rack so hard he broke it. He dropped to his hands and knees, all the fight out of him, his face white.

The rider trying to grab Goldy's reins jerked for his gun. He didn't lift it from holster. He looked into the steady muzzle of Hatfield's Colt, and seemed to cave inward, his jaw dropping. His fingers jerked away from his gun butt as though it were on fire.

The tow-haired man was dragging himself away, turning a stricken face to Goldy who reared over him. Hatfield's sharp voice calmed the sorrel. The gunman dragged himself clear, groaning.

Hatfield said, "Next time you want a close look at a horse, make sure you get the owner's permission!"

The chunky man on horseback said, "Barker only wanted a look at him." His voice was sullen.

"Barker must be near-sighted."

Barker was on his feet. He was bent over on his left side, his face twisted with pain. His glance caught the badge on Hatfield's shirt and his lips twisted.

"Another one of that damned Ryerson's marshals!"

He walked to his horse and pulled himself up into saddle. Swinging around, he joined his sullen companion.

"You're headed the wrong way!" Hatfield said harshly.

The chunky man, who had been called Trask said tightly, "We're headed for the Longhorn Bar."

Hatfield shook his head. "As of right now you're heading out of town. And long as I'm marshal here you'll both stay out!"

Trask's eyes flamed. "You damned fool!" he snarled. "How long do you think you'll last?"

"Longer than you think," Jim Hatfield snapped.

He waited until they swung around and headed out of town. Then he went to Goldy and mounted. As he turned he saw the medico from Boston watching from the lunchroom doorway. Amherst's eyes held a grudging admiration.

"I take it back, Marshal," he said. "I think you'll last."

CHAPTER III

Maria Amontillo

JIM HATFIELD followed the road south along Bull Creek. Apache Barrier loomed like a blue-gray wall over his left shoulder—he was riding away from it toward low, flat-topped hills. The heat of the day was less intense with the lowering sun, but he could still feel the sweat on his chest and down the small of his back.

A half-dozen miles from Nueva Valencia the road branched, one clearly defined way heading along the creek which here hooked sharply toward higher ground. The other road crossed the creek and headed southeast, toward the coast.

He continued along the creek. Cottonwood and cedar lined the banks, and the rush of water, swifter here than close to town, reached him through the screening trees. The sound was suggestively cool, and on sudden impulse the Lone Wolf swung Goldy in along a fairly defined path to the creek's edge.

He found himself in a small, greasy clearing shaded by the trees. White-laced water spilled over a small natural rock dam, forming a cold, clear pool. His eyes lightened.

"Reminds me of the old swimming hole, back in the Brazos, Goldy," he murmured.

He unbuckled his gunbelts and hung them from his saddle-horn. Standing on

the edge of the bank, he started to peel off his shirt. He dropped his shirt on the bank and was reaching for his belt buckle when a bullet cut leaves just over his head.

The bullet came from behind him, and he moved instinctively. He went over the bank in a shallow dive as the rifle crack shivered the stillness.

The water was shockingly cold against his heated body. He kept submerged until he hit the current in the middle of the pool, then drifted with the flow. He remembered that the pool's outlet was between two huge rocks and when they loomed up, he surfaced slowly, took a deep breath and let his body get carried between the rocks. The creek shallowed beyond, the water tumbling over rocks and small sand spits.

With the big rocks as cover he stood up. The water reached his waist. Lowering himself in the water he pushed to the bank.

He heard voices. The first one was that of a woman, an older woman, to judge by its timbre. She spoke in Spanish. Her voice sounded frightened.

A younger woman's voice answered, sharply and determinedly.

A few moments later a girl appeared on the bank where Hatfield had plunged into the pool. She was a shapely, beautiful girl, about five-feet-three, dressed in tan riding breeches, silk blouse, and a big sombrero. She had a Winchester .30-caliber rifle in her hands and was peering into the pool.

Jim Hatfield frowned. He eased out from behind the rocks and quietly climbed up on bank. The girl was still telling the older woman standing behind her to shut up as he came up behind them.

"Looking for someone?" he growled.

The girl whirled. The older woman, fat, forty and Mexican, threw up her hands and cried, *"Madre de Dios!"* Then she sank to her knees, her long black dress piling up in folds, and began to pray.

The girl had more direct ideas. She brought the Winchester around and her intentions were plain. Whomever she had mistaken him for, the Ranger thought, she still was not of a mind to apologize. He clamped his fingers on the rifle-barrel before she leveled it, and it went off, the bullet clipping twigs from branches overhead.

She had extremely strong wrists for a slim girl. For a moment she tried to wrestle him for the rifle, then suddenly let go and reached down in her boot.

Hatfield flung the rifle down as he saw her hand come up with a long, slim-bladed knife. He thought grimly, To hell with this. She needs a lesson!

He caught her wrist, whirled her around, and shoved. She made an ungraceful splash into the pool.

He stood on the bank as she surfaced, floundering at first, then he saw that she was at home in the water. She treaded water, her dark hair loose around her face, her black eyes shooting sparks.

SLOWLY, unconcernedly, Hatfield pulled his shirt over his muscled torso. She remained in the pool, her eyes glaring. The fat Mexican woman raised her eyes to him once, then lowered them again and kept on wailing.

Calmly he picked up the girl's rifle, removed the shells, then tossed the weapon over her head into the pool.

"Give you some diving practice, if you want it," he said drily. "Might cool you off some, too, young lady." His good humor returned as he buckled his cartridge belts about his lean waist. "Besides, that was no way to welcome a stranger, ma'am."

Her lips curled. "No Three Spades rider is welcome on Amontillo soil!" she flung up at him.

He shook his head. "I don't work for the Three Spades."

"Who are you?"

Hatfield grinned. "You should have asked that before." He turned to the mumbling woman, patted her shawled head, and when she looked up, frightened, he put a forefinger to his lips and winked. Then he climbed aboard Goldy and rode out of the shady clearing. . . .

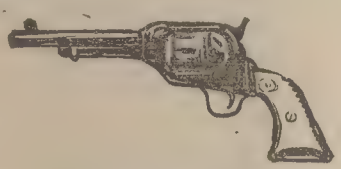
It was late afternoon when he swung in under a wide adobe arch and entered the

spacious Amontillo yard. Men stopped to stare at him, several small boys, playing around the big harness shop ran out to look at him with big brown eyes.

The hacienda stood at the far end of the walled enclosure, half-hidden behind flower beds and small, flowering shrubs. Jim Hatfield turned Goldy toward the rambling house. A small, wiry man, dressed in the manner of a Spanish *rico,* stirred from a reed chair on the big veranda and came to the head of the stairs.

Hatfield reined Goldy in. "Are you Don Felipe?"

The man frowned dubiously. The Ranger saw a sharp glance linger on his guns, then raise and focus on someone behind him. The man nodded slightly and Hat-



field, turning, saw a man standing in the doorway of a building across the yard. He was holding a rifle.

Hatfield slid his hand into and out of his pocket. The gold coin Captain McDowell had given him caught the slanting rays of the setting sun.

The wiry man stiffened. "Who are you?"

"Jim Hatfield," the Lone Wolf answered. "Texas Ranger."

A quick smile of relief eased the other man's tenseness. *"Gracias a Dios!"* he said with feeling. "I am Don José, Felipe's brother-in-law. Come, he will be glad to see you." He camé down the stairs. "We will walk," he said. "Don Felipe is at the corrals by the river, looking over the Amontillo bulls. In three days, Señor Hatfield, we hold the *corrida* in Nueva Valencia."

Jim dismounted. "I have heard," he said gravely.

Don José clapped his hands. "Take the Señor's animal!" he said sharply to a weazened stableman. "See that he is well taken care of." He allowed himself a moment of admiration. "A magnificent *caballo,* Señor Hatfield."

Hatfield fell in beside Don José. They went out through a small gate in the adobe wall and walked down under a long grape arbor and out onto a path that cut across fields of grain in which men and women were working.

The Amontillo bulls, the fighting bulls, were run in long, individual enclosures by the river. Bull Creek at this point ran wide and shallow. Don Felipe was standing by one of the pens, talking to a leathery-faced Mexican who kept nodding with peasant obsequity. A short, puckered scar disfigured the man's neck, just below the jaw line. A longer and more wicked gash on his right thigh was hidden by his clothes. Both had been inflicted by Amontillo bulls.

"Don Felipe!" Don José greeted. "This is Señor Hatfield—of the Texas Rangers!"

Don Felipe turned. He was a gray-headed man, of strong will and strong passions, and these had carved their lines in his brown face. The years had tempered this man, however, and his sharp black eyes were grave and less challenging than in former years. He was a fraction under six feet, but his big frame was gaunted down so that his clothes hung on him loosely. A small, iron-gray mustache gave his features a rather dignified look.

HATFIELD showed him the gold coin and backed it with the silver symbol of Ranger authority.

"Captain McDowell couldn't come," he explained quietly. "But he sent me to help—"

Don Felipe made a quick motion with his hands. "Jim Hatfield—he who is called the Lone Wolf. Who in all Texas has not heard of you, Señor? I am indeed grateful."

Hatfield shunted the conversation into more direct channels. "I arrived this morning. I heard talk, in town, of trouble between you and a man called Farnum Gray. I—"

He fingered his marshal's badge, and he saw the puzzlement that came into Don Felipe's eyes. The scarred hand was standing to one side, listening. The Ranger

shrugged. "Perhaps we can talk elsewhere, Don Felipe?"

The gaunt *haciendado* nodded briskly. "*Si*, Señor. I am forgetting my manners. We shall talk in the coolness of the hacienda, over a glass of good wine, *si?*"

He turned to the scarred man by the pen. In the pole corrals were the huge bulls, black-and-whites mostly. But in the near enclosure stood a roan-colored brute, as high in the shoulders as Don José was tall. A huge, formidable animal with yard-wide needle-sharp horns.

"See that *El Rojo* is not disturbed. Pedro," Don Felipe ordered the man. "Keep him free of the others. He will make a worthy opponent for Ortega's steel."

Pedro bowed and backed away. Don Felipe turned to Don José. "Has my son returned?"

Don José shook his head. He didn't meet his brother-in-law's eyes, and Don Felipe's lips tightened. He looked at Hatfield, explained, "He rode to Nueva Valencia this morning. I expect him back soon."

They walked back through the fields and in through the gate. The shadows were drawing long across the yard.

Don Felipe was saying, "For a hundred years, Señor Hatfield, the Amontillos have lived here. This land has become part of us—we have spilled our blood on this soil and mixed our bones with it. Now this man, Farnum Gray, says I have no right to it."

They paused by the stairs, turning to the sound of a light carriage wheeling in under the wide adobe archway. Don Felipe's harsh face softened.

"Señor Hatfield," he sighed, "you will have the pleasure of meeting my daughter, Maria."

The carriage pulled up in the middle of the yard and a girl jumped down from the seat, turning the team over to the hostler who came to meet her. An older woman followed her.

Hatfield settled back on his feet, a faint smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. The girl coming toward them, walking with quick, free stride, was the girl he had pushed into Bull Creek!

CHAPTER IV

"Amontillo Acres Needs You"

MARIA AMONTILLO still smoldered. Her clothing was still damp from her dunking in the creek, but her anger was a live fire that flared brightly as she recognized the tall, broad-shouldered man standing beside her father.

Her stride broke and she brought up short. Without artifice, and mannishly dressed, this girl was still beautiful. She stood facing them, slim, well-rounded, her breasts pushing against the damp sheen of her silk blouse, her lips slightly parted, a hint of white teeth showing.

Jim Hatfield had come across many women on his lonely trails. But there was something about this olive-skinned girl that struck an unaccustomed chord in the Lone Wolf. He felt the pull of her attraction and it took the slight smile from his eyes. For a moment he allowed himself the pleasure of what might be. Then, almost harshly, he pushed the thought from him. There was no place in his life for a woman, not even a woman such as Maria Amontillo.

Beside him Don Felipe said, "Maria, this is Jim Hatfield of the Texas Rangers. Señor Hatfield—my daughter. And her *dueña*, Luisa."

Maria's eyes were full of darting lights. "We have met," she said curtly. "Most unhappily."

Don Felipe looked bewildered. He turned his gaze to Luisa who mumbled hastily, "I told her to be careful. But she would not listen to me."

"What is it?" Don Felipe demanded harshly. "What has happened?" He turned to the Ranger. "Perhaps we have made a mistake?"

Hatfield bowed slightly. "If the Señorita Maria will permit me," he said, "I would like to apologize for so rudely pushing one so lovely into the creek."

Don Felipe stiffened.

Maria Amontillo hesitated. Then a smile started in her eyes and reached down to her lips. She was fire and violence, this girl, and proud as hell. But there was in her the ingrained graciousness and sense of honor of the Amontillos, enriched by a sense of humor lacking in her father.

"Wah!" Luisa interrupted, shaking her head. "Señor Hatfield is not easily frightened, as Maria found out."

Don Felipe shook his head, while Don José smiled slightly. "It is still all very confusing. But no matter." Don Felipe made a short motion with his hand.

"If apologies are to be made, Señor Hatfield, let me be the one to make them." She turned to her father. "It is I who deserves to be scolded. I mistook Señor Hatfield for one of the gringo gunmen hired by Farnum Gray. I had not intended to kill him when I fired—only to frighten him."

"Maria, you will change as befitting a Señorita, *si!*"

It was an order, but graciously couched, and Maria nodded. She strode past them, smiling at Hatfield. Luisa followed her, casting a long look at the Ranger. Don Felipe was still shaking his head.

"My daughter should have been a boy.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

LONG RANGE EARS

THE lightning rod salesman was talking loud and long. "You boys better buy some of these and protect yourselves, because I can hear a storm coming up across the mountains. She's a real whooper-doo, with plenty of thunder and lightning, too. Of course she's maybe two-three days away yet, by the sound of her, but she's sure enough coming. I got the best ears in the business. They ain't never let me down yet."

"Heard a feller on a platform say the same thing once," Amos Dibble remarked dryly. "Had a rope around his neck, he did, and when the trap door dropped, he got let down pretty fast. Which means I ain't got a whole lot of faith in your ears, mister. They's only one gent I ever knew that could hear a storm coming three days away. Had ears like an elephant, and we called him Flappy. Flappy Jack. You remember him, Tom?"

"Talking Tom" Truesdale spat off into the grass beside the stoop. "I recollect the time I was riding the point of a trail herd with Flappy. One of them big herds we used to run up to Abilene, it was, with maybe seven-eight thousand head a-rumbling along behind us and bawling their heads off. And all of a sudden Flappy hollers to swing 'em to the left a ways, so we did, and pretty soon he says it's okay to swing 'em back. I asked him what it was all about, and he told me there was a nest of quail about ready to hatch in the long grass there. 'How do you know?' I asks him, and he says, 'I heard 'em, that's how. Plain as day I heard them little fellers trying to scratch their way out of their shells.'

"I mind the time I was cleanin' my gun with an oily rag on the table in the bunkhouse," Amos Dibble said. "Flappy was snoring in one of the rear bunks, and when I happened to drop the rag accidental on the table, Flappy jumped like he'd been shot. Wanted to know how I expected a man to sleep with all that racket goin' on."

The lightning rod man said, "The trouble with you boys, you ain't got no shame at all—telling stories like that."

She is headstrong, and like the men of the Amontillo line, Señor Hatfield. I have been unfortunate," he continued as he went up the stairs with Hatfield and Don José. "My wife bore me four children before she died. My oldest son, a true Amontillo, was gored to death only last year, during the fiesta in Nueva Valencia. My youngest, another boy, was taken by fever."

They entered into a big, spacious room not so high of ceiling as it was wide and deep and cool.

"This way," Don Felipe said, while Don José excused himself and said he'd see about the wine.

Jim Hatfield followed the older man through a wide arch into a big room dominated by a huge stone fireplace. Above the low mantle was hung a gleaming sword of fine Cordoban steel. The massive head of a black fighting bull was mounted above the blade, the glassy eyes still retaining something of the wild fierceness of the animal.

Don Felipe said, "On that wall, Señor Hatfield, is the story of my family. *L'espada y el toro!*"

He waved toward a dark leather chair. "I do not wish to tire you, Señor Hatfield. But as you have come to my call for help, I must explain why I have been forced to call on Captain McDowell." He paused, shook his head. "For many years the Amontillos have taken care of their troubles without outside help. But now—"

HE MADE a gesture to the row of oil paintings hanging on the walls. Portraits of the Amontillos.

"Don Carlos Fernandez y Amontillo"—he was pointing to the picture of a dark, hawk-nosed man—"was the greatest *matador* of his day. He killed more than one hundred bulls, Señor, before he was so badly gored he could no longer enter the ring. So pleased was the King that he graciously offered Carlos more than a thousand acres in the land of New Spain, to be chosen by Carlos himself. Carlos settled here—a valley surrounded by high walls of rock. Settled here to carry on in the New World the proud traditions of the *corrida*, and to raise fighting bulls for the *corridas* of Spain."

Don José came in then, pausing beside Don Felipe. He was slighter than his brother-in-law, and there was a greater sensitivity in him. He was a Goya, the brother of Felipe's wife, and he lacked the feeling for the great bulls that ruled the Amontillo corrals.

Behind him a manservant entered with a tray, which he set on the big oak table. Don Felipe continued as Don José poured.

"For more than one hundred years the Amontillos have ruled *el Valle de los Toros*. We have been content here. Even after this land became a part of the Republic of Texas, and now the State of Texas, we have lived in peace. Content to raise our fighting bulls, to continue the traditions bequeathed us by Don Carlos.

"In the town of Nueva Valencia is a bull ring, built by Don Carlos. Every year it has been the custom to hold a fiesta in town for the people of the valley. And always the big event is the *corrida*. It is open to anyone who has the courage to face the Amontillo bulls, Señor. And it has been custom since the beginning that the Amontillos put up prizes for the best performance in the bull ring. We, the Amontillos, have always fought for the honor and the glory of our family—the others for the prizes we donated."

He paused again, his lined face showing the tiredness that was corroding his spirit.

"This is our land, Señor Hatfield—in a hundred years it has never been threatened. Then, last year, one Farnum Gray came up from the coast with some cattle and many riders. More riders than he had need for to look after his stock, Señor.

"In a little basin to the west, I ran several flocks of sheep. This man drove my herders and their families away at the point of a gun, slaughtered my sheep, and took over the dwellings of my people. When I went to see him, he laughed in my face. This was free graze, he said, and when I explained to him that I owned this land, he demanded to see proof of my ownership. When I told him about the grant

given to my ancestor by the King of Spain, he declared it was invalid. He was a lawyer, he said, and he knew of what he was talking. I grew angry. I rode back with my vaqueros. But we could not match his guns, Señor Hatfield—and I still grieve over the graves of the brave men who died for my folly."

Hatfield shook his head. "Farnum Gray was bluffing you," he said levelly. "If you have the original land grant, duly signed and stamped with the seal of the King of Spain, the State of Texas will acknowledge your title to these lands."

Don José smiled. "It is as I told you, Felipe. It is not too late to withdraw your wager."

Don Felipe made a proud gesture of dismissal. "The wager was made in the plaza, before a hundred witnesses, José. Would you have me back out now? I would never again hold up my head, nor would Ortega—"

DON JOSÉ flushed. "Family honor I, too, understand, Felipe. But to place the burden of it upon a boy who—"

"Who is an Amontillo!" Don Felipe snapped. He was straight, quivering adamant. Then he turned to the Ranger and shook his head. "I apologize for this show of temper, Señor. But just three days before you arrived, I made a wager with Farnum Gray. I wagered Amontillo Acres on whoever won the honors at the *corrida* to be held this Sunday. My boy, Ortega, will represent the Amontillos—a member of Gray's rancho appearing for him. The judges will be impartial, my honor stands on that. If Gray's man loses, it is agreed that he will leave the Valley of the Bulls."

Jim Hatfield frowned. "What guarantee have you that he will abide by that wager, Don Felipe?"

The old nobleman shrugged. "His word, Señor, witnessed by a hundred people in the town square."

The Lone Wolf shook his head. "I wish I had your faith, Don Felipe."

He turned as Maria entered. She was in more demure attire and her black hair was coiled on her head and topped by a glittering comb. She was the Señorita at this moment, the lady of the house, and Jim Hatfield came to his feet.

"I am in time, I see," she said, nodding at the tray on the able, "to join you in a drink of welcome, Señor Hatfield."

Don José poured. They stood around the table, with the ancient sword of Don Carlos on the wall, with the framed portraits of the Amontillos looking down at them. Hatfield lifted his glass to his lips, and his gaze was caught by the picture of a thin, sensitive-faced youth on the wall across the room.

Don Felipe turned. "My son, Ortega," he revealed. "I am sorry he is not present. But you will see him in the morning, I trust."

Hatfield dropped his gaze. He could see Don José's eyes glancing floorward, and Maria's, watching him. He made no comment.

For the young man Don Felipe called his son was the slim youth he had met on the Apache Trail, leaving the valley!

"A good wine," he said, placing his glass down on the table. "One remembers it with pleasure."

Don Felipe was pleased. "We make it here, from our own grapes."

Hatfield said, "I would like to see that land grant, Don Felipe."

The *haciendado* nodded. "Come, Señor Hatfield."

They went out through the rear of the house, along a path shadowed by a small grape arbor, to an adobe chapel. A small burial plot, enclosed by an iron fence, contained the bones of the Amontillos.

Luisa and another woman were kneeling before the altar. A candle burned before the plaster statue of the Virgin Mary.

Don Felipe turned into a narrow archway that led to a small square vault of a room. The enclosure had no windows, nor any other entrance. There was an old, brass-bound chest set on a sturdy table.

"Here I have kept all the old records, Señor Hatfield. The papers of Don Carlos are here. The gold coin I sent to Captain McDowell came from this chest. I have not had occasion to look through them for

many weeks—"

He stopped as if a knife had been rammed through his ribs. Hatfield stepped quickly to his side.

"The lock!" Don Felipe said shakily. "Someone has broken it! Someone has been here without my permission!"

Maria pushed forward. "Perhaps the thief took only the coins, *Padre?*"

Wordlessly Don Felipe opened the chest, pawed through old papers, mementoes. When he turned he was like a stricken man. "It is not here, Señor Hatfield. The land grant is gone!"

Hatfield bit his lips. This was not the time to remind Don Felipe that long ago he should have filed that grant at the State House.

Don José was bewildered. "But who—who would have known, Felipe?"

DON FELIPE did not answer. He seemed crushed. In the musty silence of the vault Luisa's muttered prayers made a peaceful buzzing.

Don José was the first to go. Maria took her father's arm, and the Ranger followed out through the flickering shadows of the chapel, along the arbor path to the house.

Here Hatfield said quietly, "I think it would be best for me to return to town tonight, Don Felipe. And perhaps it would be wise if word does not get about that I am a Texas Ranger."

Don Felipe nodded. Don José said, "I will see that your horse is made ready, Señor Hatfield."

Maria hung back as her father turned, went slowly up the steps to the house. Then she turned to Jim. "I saw your eyes, when you looked up at the portrait of my brother," she said quickly. "You know? You know that Ortega has run away, that he will not be present when the *corrida* opens?"

The Ranger nodded, his face sober. "I saw him this morning, on the Apache Trail. I didn't know who he was then."

Maria's face was soft with understanding. "It will almost kill my father when he finds out. But Ortega has always been afraid of the bulls."

Hatfield glanced toward the pens by the river, softened by the long shadows. "Can't say that I blame him," he murmured.

"Blame him for being afraid?" Maria shook her head. "But there is the Amontillo honor, Señor Hatfield. And the sword of Don Carlos Amontillo that hangs on the wall in our house. That sword has been our symbol—it has dominated our way of life. Ortega will come back!" She said it passionately. "He'll come back for the *corrida!*"

Jim Hatfield glanced toward the hacienda. "And if he doesn't? Without the land grant to back him up, your father will lose Amontillo Acres by default."

Maria shook her head. Her eyes flashed with sudden fire. "Not by default! There will be an Amontillo in the bull-ring when the *corrida* opens. That I promise!"

The Lone Wolf smiled gently. "I hope so, Señorita. In the meantime there is something I can do. That is to locate the land grant stolen from your father. Only Gray could hope to benefit by its loss at this time. I will do what I can."

Maria put her hand on his arm. "I want you to know, Señor, that I was against my father writing for help from the Rangers. We have always managed to settle our own troubles here. But Don José insisted, and now I'm glad you've come. Amontillo Acres needs you."

He touched his hat brim. "We'll see what happens at the *corrida,*" he said quietly. "*Adios*, Señorita Maria."

He mounted Goldy who had been brought to him saddled and ready for travel, and headed across the yard for the adobe archway.

CHAPTER V

Peebles Loses a Bet

GRAY'S Three Spades outfit sweltered in the afternoon sun. Mesquite Basin, a stony arid bowl surrounded by desolate hills, had been occupied only by

Amontillo sheep and a small band of goats until the coming of Farnum Gray. Even the small, often dry, creek that slithered through the Basin to join the Bull down-valley looked hot, and was known as Rio Caliente.

Three adobe huts which had been used by the Amontillo herders had been taken over by Gray, corrals had been put up along the river, and with an addition tacked on to the bigger of the shelters it had become the main ranch house.

Farnum Gray had expected this to be but the temporary quarters of the Three Spades, and he had not been particular. A shrewd man who put self-interest first, he had been disbarred for practice "unbecoming a member of the Texas Law Association," and politely, but firmly, ordered to take his person out of Austin. But it was in Austin that he had heard of the Valley of the Bulls, a valley left in the backwash of Texas expansion. A land far enough from Texas law to be ripe for the picking.

Farnum was an untidy, heavy man running to sloppy fat. He shaved once a week, got a haircut when he thought of it, was not particular when he changed his shirt. He didn't mind living in careless sloth. But he was never careless in his planning; he left nothing to chance. He had planned his moves here as though he had been preparing a brief, and a wrong move worried him far more than his personal appearance.

He was sitting in the breezeway connecting the main house to the galley having spiked coffee with Sol Breck, Sheriff of Bull Valley. From where they sat they could look down to the creek. Several of his riders were sitting on the pole corral fence, watching a hand named Slim break a hammerhead mustang. The others were spread through the bunkhouse, killing time.

The crew, Gray realized, was getting tired of inactivity. They had been brought here with the promise of big money, which he had assured them would be theirs when Amontillo Acres fell into his hands.

He took a long swallow of his coffee, scowled as he spat out grounds. A few yards away Pedro Smith, a half-breed, better known as Shoshone, was tossing a knife at one of the supports of the breezeway. Sho Smith was a taciturn man who kept to himself; he didn't get along with the others. But he was one of the best trackers in the Southwest, and the most dangerous man in the Three Spades crew.

Gray brushed the back of his hand across his lips and pulled his attention back to the sheriff. Breck was shaking his head.

"They buried Monte today. But I'd feel easier if I knew what Ryerson was up to, Gray. I don't trust that damn tinhorn!"

Gray's blue eyes were like frozen ice. "Forget him, Sol," Gray grunted. "I tell you he's working that marshal angle as a warning he wants a clear hand in town, that's all! We'll let him alone—until we take over Amontillo Acres!"

Breck eased back, unconvinced. He was a wiry man, his slenderness making him appear taller than he was. Sandy hair, blue eyes, a pug nose and scant beard gave him a youthful and often disarming appearance. But Breck was forty-two years old, an old hand with a gun, a deadly killer. He had drifted down from Idaho with Peebles, his trail mate, and Gray had been hiring. The Valley of the Bulls had sounded like a good place to drop out of sight for a while and they had thrown in with Gray.

He pushed his cup away, his eyes narrowing. "Ever hear of Bat Ryerson?"

Gray scowled. "He was killed somewhere up in the Panhandle. Had a mean reputation as a gunman. Why?"

"I'll lay you odds this gambler is his brother. I knew Bat." Breck swiped irritatedly at a fly. "If he is, he'll be a tough joker to handle."

Gray ran pudgy fingers around his dirty collar. "Dammit!" he yelled as the half-breed thunked the knife into the support again. "Practice with that thing somewhere else!" He scowled as Smith pulled out the blade and walked away. "Damn breed makes me nervous. Always throwing that knife around—never talking!"

Breck shrugged. "Sho's a good man in a

fight. And a good man to send out on a job alone. He takes care of things, quick and quiet."

SLOPS RILEY, the cook, appeared in the chuckhouse doorway. He was a dirty, seamed-faced man of sixty with a mean temper and a sharp tongue. "Couple of the boys coming up the road with a cayuse, Gray. Looks like Bremmer's gray."

The disbarred lawyer came to his feet, Breck beside him. "That *is* Bremmer's gray!" he growled. "I saw Bremmer saddle him this morning!"

The two riders came into the yard, leading a dusty mare. "Found her coming up the road, Boss," one man said. "Reins looped around the saddle-horn. No signs of Bremmer."

The lawyer swung on Breck. "See Bremmer anywhere on your way up here?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Wasn't in town, either."

Gray was angry. "He and Milo left together. I thought they were headed for town."

"I rode with them," the other new arrival volunteered. "We took the long way around, and Milo spotted young Amontillo heading for the Barrier. He and Bremmer went after him. My cayuse threw a shoe, so I headed back."

"Why in hell didn't you tell me before, Kelso?" Gray shouted.

"Figured they would be back to tell you theirselves," Kelso answered sullenly.

"I wouldn't worry about Milo and Bremmer," the man with Kelso said coldly. "They can take care of theirselves."

Breck sneered. "Looks like it, eh, Lefty?" The sheriff didn't like this Lefty, nor Milo and Bremmer either. He had joined Gray strictly for personal reasons.

Lefty flushed. Kelso said uneasily, "Maybe I better take some of the boys and look around?"

Gray nodded. "Keep away from the Amontillo place. We don't want any trouble until after the bullfight. Get back here by dark!"

Breck broke out his Bull Durham. "So the Amontillo kid was running away from his father, eh?"

Gray nodded, watching Kelso and Lefty head for the corrals. "I knew he didn't have the guts for this bullfighting. That's why I cornered Don Felipe into making that bet, Sol. Honor of the Amontillos!" Gray sneered. "The damn fool'll stick by it, too. When his kid doesn't show up, my man Valdez will win by default." He scowled. "Which is just as well. Just between you and me I'm beginning to think this Mex import, Valdez, is yellow. What's he been doing besides drawing my money and guzzling liquor in town?"

Breck's voice held an edge of contempt. "Struts around telling everybody who'll listen about the bulls he's killed. Plays the women down in the Mex section of town." The sheriff's eyes glinted as he brought a light to his cigarette. "The fool'll be lucky if he don't get a knife between his ribs before Sunday."

Gray said sharply, "That's your job, Sol. Keep him sober and out of trouble until he puts on his show."

"What if young Amontillo shows up?" Breck interrupted.

"Valdez should have little trouble outclassing Ortega," Gray snapped. "But if he doesn't—"

"Yeah?"

"I don't have Don Felipe's kind of honor," Gray said shrewdly. "I'm moving in on Amontillo Acres, win or lose at that bullfight Sunday!"

Breck took a long drag at his cigarette. "Reckon I'll head back for town. With Monte out of the way, things should be quiet."

Gray walked to the sheriff's slack-hipped cayuse with Breck. "I'll send the breed down tomorrow."

He looked past the sheriff, to two riders who were swinging in toward the ranchhouse. Trask, one of the riders, motioned to his companion, slumped over the horn.

"Barker's got some busted ribs, Gray. Better get Cookie to give him a hand."

Gray snapped, "What happened to him? Fall?"

"Uh-uh!" Trask shook his head. "We ran into trouble in town."

BRECK swung away from his cayuse at this. "Trouble? With who?"

"New marshal," the heavyset rider said. "Big feller. He didn't like the way Barker was examining his cayuse—a big, golden sorrel any man'd give a fortune to own." Trask made a motion with his shoulders. "He slammed Barker against the tie-rack."

"What were you doing?" Gray demanded.

"Drawing!"

"Well?" the ex-lawyer's voice rasped. "What happened?"

"I didn't get to close my fingers around my butt!" Trask growled. "I didn't see *him* draw, but I damn well couldn't miss looking into the muzzle of his Colt!" He turned to Breck. "Ryerson's got hisself a real gunman this time, Sol. You're going to have trouble!"

Breck's voice was steady. "Where was Peebles?"

"Didn't see him around." Trask avoided his boss's glance. "We was shown the trail out of town and told to ride." He made a defensive gesture with his hands. "After what happened—we did!"

Gray walked over to Barker who wasn't saying anything. "All right," he said sourly. "Get Slops to give you a hand with him. Get him to a bunk."

He waited until Barker was taken to the adobe hut across the yard. "What do you make of that, Sol?"

Breck shook his head. "Anybody's guess," he said shortly. "But if he's Ryerson's man, then what I've been thinking all along is true. Ryerson's dealing himself a hand in this play!"

Gray's face was like a closed fist. "No one's cutting himself in on this, Sol!"

Breck shrugged. "I'm heading back for a look at this new marshal. If Milo and Bremmer show up, let me know. Send the breed. He'll be a good man to have around if this badge-toter is as good as Trask says."

Gray watched the sheriff mount and ride off. He knew Breck's reputation, and some of his uneasiness ebbed. Hell, he had almost a dozen of the fastest guns along the Border backing him here. And he had Don Felipe up a tree. He couldn't lose. . . .

The Lone Wolf kept seeing Don Felipe's face as he rode back to town. Something more than the loss of the land grant had finally broken the old Don. It was as if he suspected that his son would not be back, that this year the opening of the *Corrida de Los Toros* would find Amontillo honor trampled in the dust.

The evening shadows flowed down from the Barrier, drawing a purple curtain of mystery over this forgotten corner of Texas where bullfighting and honor were intermixed and a man was willing to gamble the heritage of a hundred years on the outcome of a bullfight.

A lopsided moon topped the ragged skyline as Nueva Valencia's lights appeared on the trail. Jim Hatfield rode down Longhorn Avenue, passing the sheriff's office. The lanky deputy was still sitting in his chair and the Ranger wondered humorlessly if the man ever left it.

He turned Goldy in at the stable on Main Street and walked back to the Crystal Palace. The bar was loaded. At the far end of the room a piano and a fiddle made music for dancers. Hatfield was tired. He headed for the stairs, pushing past the men crowding the tables.

He had his foot on the first step when Ryerson said, "Just a minute, Texas!" The gambler was leaning against the wall. He wasn't wearing his spectacles. "A town marshal's job is in town," he reminded Jim coldly.

Hatfield frowned. Again he felt the pattern of something he couldn't place, some trend of meaning in this man's behavior he couldn't fathom. His reply was curt. "I'm back!" He started up the stairs.

Ryerson's voice was edged. "You have business out of town?"

Hatfield turned. "You hired a marshal, Ryerson," he said bleakly. "What I do out of town is my business."

"Not when I'm paying your salary," the gambler said softly.

"You haven't paid me yet," Hatfield growled. "And if you don't like the way I work, we'll call it off right now." He reached a hand up to the badge on his shirt.

RYERSON shook his head. "Don't get riled, Texas. I heard what happened in front of the Boston Bean. For your information Trask and Barker are Three Spades riders." He smiled with his lips. "It's just that I like to know where you go, Texas."

Jim Hatfield turned away and went up to his room. He washed, shaved, and changed into a clean shirt.

The window in his room was open. The sounds of revelry below were muted enough so that the plunking of a guitar and a soft Spanish voice reached him. The moon lifted higher, sending its pale light into the room.

The Ranger had been on the go since early morning, and felt the weariness caused by the long day pull at his muscles. But he was too restless to relax. He had come almost a thousand miles to pay a debt for Captain McDowell, and now all he could do was wait. Wait on the outcome of a bullfight.

He shook his head. He didn't believe a man like Farnum Gray would abide by the wager he had made Don Felipe. Yet with Ortega gone, who would be the Amontillo entrant?

The question of the land grant bothered him. Why should Farnum Gray have wanted it? After having made the bet he must have suspected he'd win by default. Or was he hedging?

Somehow the loss of the land grant didn't ring true. Unless someone else was planning to cut in on Amontillo Acres. . . .

Sad Peebles stirred as Jim Hatfield rode past. He blinked his watery eyes twice and uncoiled his long legs, coming up out of the chair with a sigh. He had been waiting for this man since Breck had come back to town.

Peebles was tired of inactivity. He was also tired of always taking a back seat to Sol Breck. He took a hitch at his sagging gunbelt, slid a big palm over the bone handle of his Colt.

He walked across the street to the Longhorn Bar, elbowed the slatted doors aside and walked in. The sheriff was hunched over the near end of the bar, listening to Severino Valdez, a short, swarthy, powerful man with thick black eyebrows. The brass rail was lined solid.

Peebles walked across the room and elbowed the man next to Breck out of the way. "He just rode in," he said.

Breck looked up from his glass. "Recognize him?"

Peebles shook his head. "I'll handle this one," he growled.

Breck shook his head. "From what I hear he's out of your class, Sad. I think I better come along."

Peebles scowled. "What do you mean out of my class?"

Breck said, "Don't push your luck too far. I'll finish this drink and we'll both go see the new marshal."

Peebles slapped a ten-dollar bill on the bar. "I'll bring the tinhorn in to you personal, Sol. If I don't, you pick up the ten."

Sol put a hand on his deputy's arm. "Don't be a fool, Sad."

"I'll cover that bet," the man next to Valdez said. He was Charley Flint who owned the Longhorn Bar. "Better have a drink before you go," he said, grinning. "You might need it."

Peebles sneered. "Save it. I'll be back in five minutes. I'll buy you a bottle—with your money!"

He left the bar with Flint's grin riding him. He had a long, loping stride that people recognized. He walked down Main Street to the Crystal Palace, shoved his way through the doors, and stood looking over the crowd, a horny thumb hooked in his belt. He didn't see the new marshal.

He walked out, crossed the street to the Boston Bean, didn't see his man. Peebles was disgusted. He walked back to the corner of Longhorn and Main and stopped, the passing minutes making him ugly.

HE WAS starting back when he saw Hatfield leave the Palace, head

across the street for the lunchroom. Peebles licked his lips like a big cat spotting prey.

"I'll show them!" he growled. "I'll bring him into the Longhorn and dump him in Flint's lap—damned if I won't!"

And to make sure, he drew his Colt as he started down the street for the Boston Bean!

When Jim Hatfield entered the lunchroom, Ephraim Weeks was hunched over

IT'S A PIPE

the counter, reading a month old newspaper.

Jim glanced over the empty stools. "Where's the doc?" he asked. "The young fellow who was in here this afternoon?"

The New Englander eyed him solemnly. "He only eats here."

The lawman settled himself on a stool. "I gathered that," he said drily. "What's a fellow like him doing in this neck of Texas?"

Weeks ran long fingers along his jaw. "Well," he answered slowly, "I reckon he likes it here."

Hatfield shrugged. "All right," he growled. "Don't mind me."

"That's right, Eph!" a voice chuckled softly. "Don't mind him a-tall!"

Hatfield turned his head. The lanky deputy was standing in the doorway, a Colt in his big hand.

Jim grinned. "You always eat with a gun in your hand, Deputy?"

Peebles sneered, "Sometimes, Marshal." He moved slowly toward the counter. "See you're wearing Ryerson's piece of tin. That tinhorn never learns, does he?"

Hatfield shrugged again, the humor sliding out of his eyes. "Depends," he said flatly.

"On what?"

"On the polecats who give him trouble, I guess," the marshal growled. He pointed at the gun in the other lawman's hand. "What are you aiming to do with that?" Peebles' yellow teeth showed in a horsy grin. "I'm going to take that tin badge and pin it to the seat of your pants, big feller. Then I'm going to kick you all the way up to the Longhorn Bar where I'll collect a bet. That's what I aim to do!"

Hatfield's eyes half closed. "Want to bet on it?"

The deputy slid closer. "Keep your hands up! Unpin that star." He waited, his Colt held close to the Ranger's side, his shoulders hunched. "Toss it on the counter," he snapped.

The Lone Wolf dropped the marshal's badge on the wood. Peebles sneered, "You ain't so tough, feller." He edged closer to the counter and reached for the star with his free hand. "Now turn around and—"

Hatfield kicked him in the shins at the same time he batted the Colt aside. The slug punched a hole in the window. The deputy was bending forward, howling, when Hatfield hit him full in the mouth. Peebles jackknifed over the counter, then started to slide down between the stools.

Hatfield rubbed his bleeding knuckles. He picked up his badge and pinned it back on his shirt, and the motion started a thin, reckless grin in his eyes. He reached down for the unconsious deputy, hauled him up on the counter, and ripped the badge from Peebles' vest.

The deputy was as limp as a canvas bag. Hatfield lifted him, let him sag across his shoulder, straightened, and started for the door.

Weeks came to life then. He untied his apron and came around the counter. Jim Hatfield was already down the street, a big man walking easily with the deputy across his shoulder.

A small crowd was following him by the time he shouldered his way into the Longhorn. The big bar was going full blast when he entered, but it was surprising how fast it quieted down.

Breck turned around as Hatfield dumped his deputy across the first table he came to. Peebles rolled limply to the floor and started to paw among the chairs. Men squirmed away from him.

JIM caught the thin glitter of Breck's star. "I'm the new marshal, Sheriff," he introduced himself "Your deputy was disturbing the peace."

Breck licked his lips. He felt the hard lip of the bar against his back, but it gave him small comfort. The big man's green eyes bothered him. Where had he seen this man before? Little beads of sweat gathered on his upper lip.

"I reckon there's too much law in Valencia," Hatfield growled. "Two badges too many." He was pushing Sol Breck, but the sheriff didn't move. Hatfield held out his left hand. "I'll take yours, too, Sheriff. We'll save the taxpayers money."

Breck's face was like engraved iron. For the life of him he couldn't draw. He had seen this man before, or heard of him, but the actual recognition eluded him. Suddenly Breck knew he wanted no part of this. He raised both hands slowly, unpinned his badge.

"Toss it!" Hatfield ordered.

Breck did.

The Ranger caught the glinting metal and slid it into his pocket. He stopped beside Peebles, who was sitting up, holding his face in his hands.

"Might be a good idea to let a doc look at him," he suggested.

He turned and walked out. And for several minutes no one moved. Then Charley Flint walked over to the groaning deputy who started to spit blood on the floor.

"Reckon Peebles'll be eating mush from now on," he remarked unsympathetically. He turned to Breck. "Who in hell is that big hombre, Sol?"

Breck ran his tongue across his lips. "Ain't sure," he said unsteadily. He pushed away from the bar like a man in a trance, walked right past Flint and banged the slatted doors.

One of the customers whistled softly. "Well, I'll be damned. Breck's scared! Did you see his face?"

Charley Flint scowled. He nudged Peebles with his toe. "Somebody get this beanpole out of here," he growled. "Before he messes up the floor!"

CHAPTER VI

Town Marshals Come High

ROGER AMHERST came across the street to watch Hatfield nailing a sign over the sheriff's office door. It was a new sign and it read:

MARSHAL'S OFFICE

Hatfield banged in the last nail, came down the short ladder, and surveyed his work with evident satisfaction.

The young medico grinned. "I owe you a meal, Texas. Had breakfast?"

Jim noded. "An hour ago. But I'll join you in a cup of coffee."

They went down the street to the Boston Bean. Ephraim Weeks was sweeping behind the counter. He looked up and stopped sweeping.

"Bacon and eggs," young Amherst ordered cheerfully. "The marshal'll have java." He turned to Jim. "Black?"

Hatfield nodded. Weeks called the order to the man in the kitchen, and poured out coffee from a pot.

"What did you hit Sad Peebles with last night?" Dr. Amherst asked, grinning.

Hatfield's eyes widened. "Was he hurt?"

"Lost two lower and three upper teeth," Amherst said with professional disinterest. "Loosened most of the rest of them. Slight concussion, too."

The marshal wagged his head. "You don't say?" He took a sip of his hot coffee.

Amherst was suddenly serious. "I don't know who you are, Marshal. But this town has needed a good cleanup. The law's been a farce. Both Peebles and Sol Breck are Gray's men and they run things high-handedly here. Ryerson's marshals, up to now, have been just as bad. They did what Ryerson told them to do. But you know, I've got a feeling you're different. You're neither Gray's man, nor Ryerson's." He waited a moment, frowning a little. "Just who are you, Marshal?"

Hatfield shrugged. "A drifter from up north," he said quietly.

Amherst shook his head. "I'll mind my own business."

Jim Hatfield matched his grin. "What are you doing here? It's a long way from Boston."

Amherst looked up at Weeks standing over the counter. "I—"

"I know," the Ranger interrupted drily, turning to the counterman. "He likes it here."

Weeks scowled and walked away. The young doctor smiled. "Strangely enough, that's the truth. There's a bit of old Spain here, there's warmth and laughter. A bit different from where I come from Marshal." He shrugged. "You know, a man can be born into the kind of place I was, and yet not fit. He may not know it, but if he stays he'll never be happy. He'll always be restless and dissatisfied!"

"And if he drifts?" Hatfield asked levelly.

Roger Amherst's eyes lighted. "He may never find contentment. But I believe that for every man there's a place he'll call home. A particular spot where he'll fit. I found it here, Marshal."

Hatfield nodded. He liked this young fellow. He pushed his mug aside and got off the stool. "Luck to you, son."

Amherst swiveled around. "Will you be staying, Marshal?"

The lawman paused in the doorway, a slow smile touching his lips. "Don't think so. Like you say, some men never find their place. I'm one of them. . . ."

Jim Hatfield was sitting in his new office when Maria Amontillo rode into town. He watched her jog past on a rangy roan horse with a streak of white reaching from arched neck to chest. She was an eye-pleasing sight as she rode like a man, astride, and without her duenna in tow.

Completely uninhibited, he thought, and wondered at this, knowing something of the strictness by which custom bound Spanish women.

After she passed he felt restless. He had been waiting for something to break, some kickback from his move last night. He had come to help the Amontillos, only to find his hands tied. As long as Don Felipe was willing to abide by the wager he had been tricked into, there was little that could be done until after the *corrida*.

HE HAD a strong hunch the matter would not end there, whatever the outcome. Whoever had stolen, or had had stolen for him, the Amontillo grant, would make his play at the finish of the *corrida*. His job, the Lone Wolf reflected grimly, would be to find out who had the land grant!

He toyed with the badges he had taken from Breck and Peebles, pulled out a drawer in the battered desk, and dropped them inside. When he looked up two riders were just pulling up before the rack. One of them dismounted and headed for the door.

The man who had dismounted was a paunchy, sloppily-dressed man in his early fifties. He wore no gun that Hatfield, watching him through the dirty glass window, could see. The man who remained in saddle was an impassive-faced half-breed wearing a dirty cotton shirt that was open at the throat, and a bright red bandanna knotted around his forehead. He wore a gun on his right hip, a knife sheath at his belt.

The fat man kicked the door open as

though he owned the place, and stood framed against the sunny street. He eyed the marshal slowly, his thick lips pursing. Finally he said, "I can see why Breck quit."

Hatfield settled back against the creaky chair, an amused smile on his lips. The kickback he had been expecting had not failed him!

"I'm Farnum Gray," his caller said bluntly. If he expected the marshal to say anything he was disappointed. His eyes narrowed. "I don't know what Ryerson's paying you to wear that tin star," he said sharply. "But I'll double it."

"Why?"

The ex-lawyer frowned. He walked to the bare wall, dragged a chair to the desk, and put his foot on it. From this position, wtih his left hand on the chair back, he looked important and authoritative—a factor Gray had learned was effective when dealing with others.

"Breck worked for me," he said flatly. "I want you to take his place."

Hatfield's voice was unimpressed. "I was under the impression a sheriff worked for the community."

Gray cocked his head to one side and looked at the lawman as though trying to figure this man's angle.

"We don't have to beat around the bush about this," he said finally. "I make the law in the valley, and Breck worked for me. He pulled out this morning. Peebles won't be any good for a long time. That's why I've come here. How much do you want?"

Hatfield grinned. "I might come high," he admitted.

Gray scowled. "Just how high?"

"I'll take the Amontillo land grant," Jim said coolly.

Gray jerked his foot down and shoved the chair aside. "Why, damn your insolent—" Rage choked him momentarily.

The Ranger thumbed his hat up on his head. "I told you my services came high," he murmured.

Gray got himself under control with an effort. But his voice was a hoarse whisper. "Breck said you might be figuring to horn in. But I'm getting Amontillo Acres, fellow—and I'm not planning a two-way split! I'm giving you a choice. You work for me, and get paid high—or you'll work against me!"

"Have it your way," Hatfield said carelessly.

Gray put pudgy hands on the table and looked into his face. "You got a fast gun, fellow—fast enough to scare Breck. But you're not big enough to buck the Three Spades. No one's that big!"

He whirled on his heel and went out, not bothering with the door. Through the window Jim saw him climb into saddle, mutter something to the breed who shot the Lone Wolf a quick, sharp look. Then both pulled away from the rack and headed down the street.

Jim Hatfield sighed.

IF GRAY didn't have the land grant, he had at least been given something to think about. The Ranger got to his feet. All he could do now was wait until the fiesta opened. If Don Felipe decided to hand over Amontillo Acres to Gray through default, there was little he could do. And that, he reflected sourly, was what would happen. With Amontillo honor at stake, Don Felipe would not do otherwise.

The new marshal came out to the walk in front of the office, paused, looked up at the sign he had nailed over the door. Some day there would be a duly authorized lawman taking over this cubby-hole, but the man would be neither Gray's man nor Ryerson's. Nor Amontillo's man, either, he reflected.

On impulse he turned down Main Street, headed for the Crystal Palace. It was nearly noon and the sun had a quieting effect on Nueva Valencia. A few slack-hipped ponies nosed the tie-racks, indifferent to the punishing heat. *Siesta* claimed the town, stilling practically all activity.

Ahead of him a swarthy man came to the head of the narrow alley between the Crystal Palace and the next building, hesitated a moment, then turned in the Ranger's direction. He took two steps, saw

Hatfield coming toward him, and stopped short. A pair of agate-black eyes met the green ones of the Lone Wolf.

Hatfield said, "Hello, Pedro," and turned to look after the Mexican he recalled having seen at the Amontillo place, as Pedro grunted and walked quickly past. He was still standing there, frowning, trying to account for Pedro's presence in town when the door creaked in the Palace.

Ryerson's voice held a faint, elusive mockery. "On the job, Marshal?"

Hatfield turned. The gambler came down the short steps and the Ranger got a whiff of hair tonic, powder and shave lotion. If Ryerson followed the pattern of most gamblers in all probability he had just recently got out of bed. He had on a newly pressed suit, but without his spectacles he looked less like the scholar and more like what he was—a man who handled cards for a living.

Hatfield's glance noticed the bulges that indicated Ryerson wore guns beneath the skirt of his coat. His mind considered the puzzle of this man. A man like Ryerson usually shunned a hip gun and resorted to a hideout weapon in times of emergency. Yet this man wore his guns openly, and he seemed coldly confident of his ability with them.

"You've outdone all your predecessors," Ryerson continued, pausing beside Hatfield. "I hear the sheriff and his deputy have left town. That leaves you as sole representative of the law here." The gambler chuckled. "I'd say you deserve a raise."

"That's what Gray thought, a few minutes ago," Jim Hatfield said bluntly.

Ryerson's eyes widened briefly. "Didn't think that shyster had the nerve. What did he want?"

"Wanted me to work for him," the Ranger answered shortly.

He was studying the gambler, his lids half closed, and it seemed to get under Ryerson's skin. The man's voice took on an edge.

"You refused?"

"He offered me twice what you're paying me," Hatfield answered. "But I had a higher price. One he wouldn't pay."

"A higher price?" Ryerson's voice was soft, cautious.

"Yeah. The land grant of Amontillo Acres."

Ryerson's eyes narrowed. "I thought Don Felipe had that," he said brittlely.

Hatfield shrugged. "So did I," he said enigmatically, and moved on down the road, leaving Ryerson tense and unsettled behind him.

He crossed the street to the Boston Bean and was mounting the steps when he heard the riders clatter up the street.

Maria Amontillo and Roger Amherst jogged past. Maria gave him a fleeting smile and the doctor nodded. Jim grinned.

He observed to himself, No wonder he likes this part of Texas. Then he pushed open the door and sat down on a stool.

WEEKS was reading the old newspaper spread over the end of the counter. He looked up, frowned. "You again?"

Hatfield grinned. "How long has the doc known the Amontillo girl?"

"Long enough to know better," Weeks remarked cynically. "Her father got ripped by one of his bulls about ten months ago. The Mex doctor was on some emergency call downvalley, and the Amontillo girl found Roger. I guess they liked the way he patched the old Don up."

Hatfield nodded absently and ordered. When Weeks brought him his dinner he asked idly, "You ever attend the bullfights?"

The New Englander nodded. "Once. Time Don Felipe's oldest boy got killed." His mouth puckered wryly. "I've got a weak stomach, I guess. And I can't see anything in deviling a four-legged creature, even if that animal is mean as hell and twice as dangerous, like those bulls Don Felipe raises."

Jim Hatfield grinned as he bent over his plate. He thought, one man's meat—another man's poison.

To the New Englander bullfighting made little sense. To Don Felipe it was a way of life. Jim shook his head and

drank his coffee.

A young cowhand with a hard face came in as the Lone Wolf got up from his stool. The waddy stepped aside and watched him go out, then turned to Weeks. "Who's he?"

"That, my son," said the gaunt man drily, "is the new marshal."

"A big feller," the young man muttered.

Weeks nodded. "In more ways than one."

CHAPTER VII

The Return of Ortega Amontillo

THE BARE RED walls of Apache Barrier were hot in the glare of the morning sun and that heat, reflecting from the rocks, punished the lean rider who hung wearily over the neck of his big black horse.

Ortega Amontillo had come back to the Valley of the Bulls!

For two days he had fought his sleepless battle, a torture of soul that had increased with every mile he had put between himself and the valley of his birth. Ortega, born an Amontillo, had also the blood of the Goyas, his mother's people.

Since childhood he had feared and hated the big horned brutes that ruled the Amontillo pens. And as he had come to maturity the sword of Amontillo, hanging over the fireplace in the big northwest room, had become a symbol of dread—a fate he could not escape. For it was tradition that at least once in his lifetime each Amontillo must face a bull in the *corrida* that opened the annual fiesta.

So Ortega had run away. But though he had put the miles between himself and the bull ring in Nueva Valencia, young Amontillo had found he could not run away from himself.

Tomorrow was the day of the *corrida*—the opening of the fiesta that would last a week. A week of gaiety, of dance and song and good food. A time when *señorita* flirted with *caballero,* when *dueñas* often looked the other way, a time for soft nights and guitars. So it had been for a hundred years.

But the memory of his brother lying still and crumpled in the ring, his blood dyeing the sand while a terrified hush held the crowd motionless haunted Ortega's thoughts; he could not rid himself of it. Slowly he brought his hand up along his beard-roughened jaw, unconsciously feeling his gaunted cheeks. The picture persisted. A terrible picture of his brother hooked on that terrible horn, being tossed like some stuffed dummy into the air.

Ortega suddenly reined in and buried his face in his hands. The sword of Amontillo! Cursed be the sword of Amontillo!

Slowly he pulled himself together. He would be of little use tomorrow, but he would not dishonor his father.

Amigo suddenly snorted softly. Ortega straightened, his glance lifting to the trail where it hooked around a jut of rock ahead. Listening, he heard what had alerted Amigo.

A rider was coming up the trail toward him, moving fast. Ortega cast a quick glance behind him. The walls hemmed him in here, and he would not have time to swing Amigo and get out of sight before the rider came around the bend!

He dropped his hand to his belt gun, a weapon he was familiar with from practice at targets on his father's land. But which he had never fired at a man. And as he closed his fingers about the butt the rider came into sight.

A rider Ortega immediately recognized—the Sheriff of Nueva Valencia!

The meeting was unexpected. Breck reined in sharply, his eyes widening as he saw who was blocking his path. He was through with the Valley of the Bulls, and he had no interest in Ortega. Had young Amontillo merely drawn aside, Breck would have ridden past. But Ortega was drawing.

Breck's right hand slashed across his waist for the gun riding high on his left side. His slug smashed into Ortega as the young Spaniard's fingers lifted his Colt

clear. Ortega fell backward out of saddle as though he had been rammed with a pole. He dropped out of sight on the off side of the trembling black.

Breck made his mistake then. Easing his Colt back into holster, he rode forward and sideward to slap Amigo across the rump. "Out of the way!" he growled, and as the black jumped forward he found himself suddenly looking down into Ortega's gun, into the boy's pain-twisted face. For a shocked second he stared, looking down that empty road to eternity.

Ortega fired twice. Breck shuddered, his fingers leaping instinctively across his waist to his Colt, closing convulsively. He dropped forward, slid from the roan's back and fell almost across Ortega's feet.

Young Amontillo dropped his Colt. The pain in his chest was burning like a red-hot poker. Knifing him with every breath.

Yet a strange peace was on Ortega.

Better this way, he thought. Better to die this way. Cleanly. Only not here. Not here! I have to get home first!

He clawed to his hands and knees. "Amigo!" he whispered. "Come back, Amigo!"

The big black turned his head. Gear jingled as he trotted back. Ortega grasped the near stirrup and pulled himself to his feet. The black stood still, seemingly understanding the weakness in this man. Slowly, painfully, Ortega pulled himself into saddle.

The effort of gathering up his reins grayed his face. "Home," he whispered. He turned the animal toward the trail, toward the distant glint of Bull Creek. "Take me home!"

The black snorted softly.

It was well into the afternoon when Amigo splashed across the creek and turned up the road to the Amontillo hacienda. Ortega was still in saddle, slumped low over the horn, clinging tenaciously, only half-conscious. The trip had been a blur of pain and heat, an eternity of hell! But inside him his soul was at peace. He was going home!

A rider appeared on the road and Amigo snorted and stopped. Through a red haze Ortega watched the man approach—a swarthy, scarred Mexican he recognized as one of his father's vaqueros.

"Pedro!" he called through clenched teeth. Relief weakened the tenacity of his will and he lapsed into grateful Spanish. "*Gracias Dios*—it is you."

He tried to straighten. The road tilted and began to whirl and in the pinwheeling darkness he seemed to see Pedro's grin stretch clear across the dark face and engulf him. He reached out to grasp the man's arm with his last conscious direction of will.

Pedro watched him fall without making a move. Amigo nuzzled the crumpled figure, then looked up and whinnied questioningly. Pedro turned over this situation slowly in his mind. He was a dull-witted man, but once he set his mind in one direction he moved along it with the exorableness of a stampede.

Finally he dismounted, bent over young Amontillo.

At any moment someone from the hacienda might come down the road. He bent and got his thick arms under Ortega and lifted him. His mount snorted nervously as he pushed the unconscious Ortega across his saddle.

Amigo trotted up close, and Pedro slid his hands along his own cayuse's flank until they found the stock of his carbine. He didn't think fast, but he was a cautious man. A shot would easily be heard at the hacienda. He slid the rifle back and reached for his knife at his belt.

Some equine sense warned the black gelding of danger. He snorted wildly and reared high as Pedro slashed for his jugular. The sharp blade carved a long, deep gash across the black's chest muscles. Blood spurted across Pedro's sleeve. The man cursed as the black, screaming with pain and fright, struck at him with iron-shod forefeet. He stumbled back in time to avoid the cutting edge of the hoofs, only to have the bony first joint hit him a glancing blow and send him sprawling. He fell on his side and scrambled quickly, fear choking him.

But Amigo was whirling away, crash-

ing through the brush toward the creek. The splashing sound of his crossing steadied Pedro. *"Muy diablo!"* he cursed in a shaken voice and shook his bloodied fist after the black.

Then, suddenly apprehensive, he turned back to his trembling cayuse and mounted. But he did not head up the road for the hacienda. With Ortega lying like a sack across his saddle, Pedro headed for Nueva Valencia. And he kept off the traveled road!

THAT same afternoon Jim Hatfield saddled Goldy and rode out of town. He jogged past the Longhorn Bar, occupied with his thoughts, and didn't notice the impassive breed who slipped out of the Longhorn side door and headed for the stable in the rear.

Farnum Gray joined the breed in the barn. The ex-lawyer's face was harsh.

"Get him alive if you can, Sho. There's something I want to get out of him."

Shoshone Smith nodded. "Bring back here?"

The pudgy man shook his head. "Up at the ranch." He caught the bridle of the breed's horse, holding him. "Don't understand this man, Sho. You heard what Charley said in there—this big fellow's tough."

The breed's eyes glinted as though light had reflected from a piece of steel. Slowly he spat between his teeth. Then he turned his buckskin out of the barn and around to the back of it, threading through back lots and rear alleys until he broke out of town.

During the year Sho Smith had been in the valley he had prowled the length and the breadth of this land until he knew every arroyo, every gully, and every trail. He was that kind of man—restless by nature, taciturn, liking to be alone, and because of this, and also because he was a half-breed, he was shunned by his fellow riders at the Three Spades.

Once clear of town he swung the buckskin toward the brush, and after fifteen minutes he dismounted and slipped forward to a point where he had a view of the trail and the fork leading to the Amontillo hacienda. He had expected the new marshal to ride his way, and he was not disappointed. Hatfield took the road to the Amontillo place at the fork. Pedro Smith's eyes glittered briefly as he slid silently back to his cayuse and mounted.

Twenty minutes later he was cutting across a hollow east of the trail when something warned him. He eased his buckskin into the cover of a small clump of jackpine and waited, his rifle across his pommel.

A rider came into the draw from the far end, heading for town. Smith's eyes narrowed. He recognized the swarthy Pedro, one of Don Felipe Amontillo's hired hands. The Mex had a limp figure across his saddle front, but from this angle Sho couldn't recognize the levis-clad legs. He hesitated a bare moment, then remembered that his job was to get the marshal, and he shrugged. When Pedro had jogged out of sight, the breed eased the buckskin out of cover and headed for the trail.

Ahead of him Hatfield was headed for the Amontillo hacienda. Not a man to remain inactive, the Ranger had decided to ride out to see Don Felipe on the remote possibility that Maria had been right about her brother.

The Lone Wolf reached the hacienda at sundown. A bell was ringing in the small chapel at the rear of the rambling house, a slow, tolling sound that reached across the fields, calling the men and women in from work, signaling the end of the day.

Swinging in under the broad archway, he saw Dr. Roger Amherst astride his horse, evidently preparing to leave. Maria Amontillo was at his stirrup, looking up at him, and beyond them Don José was slowly mounting the steps to the house.

He turned and stopped, as Hatfield rode in. Amherst lifted his eyes from Maria's flushed face as Hatfield drew alongside.

"Well," he greeted smilingly, "the Marshal of Nueva Valencia!"

Hatfield let his eyes slide from Amherst to the girl. He met Roger's grin. "You here professionally, Doc, or socially?"

"Both." The young medico's eyes went serious. "Don Felipe's laid up, Marshal. Rheumatism, far as I can diagnose. Gets his hands so's he can't close them. I gave him a sedative and something to ease the pain."

Maria said worriedly, "I'm glad you've come, Señor Hatfield. Father's badly upset over Ortega. He hasn't returned." She lamely, "the marshal's an old friend."

The Lone Wolf chuckled. "All of twenty-four hours."

The doctor's teeth clicked sharply. He started to pull his cayuse around but the marshal caught his bridle. "Hold it, Doc. Remember, *I'm* the drifting kind—not you!"

Amherst bit out tightly, "I don't give a

A TALL TEXAS TALE

THE DIRTIEST MAN

WHEN they came out of the stream and put their clothes back on, Bull McCoy said, "I feel a quarter-inch cleaner, at least."

"We was dirty, all right," agreed Windy Riley, "but not near as dirty as a man that me and John Chisum and his crew run across on the Staked Plains once. The Indians had stole everything he had, including the clothes off his back, and he'd been wandering around for two weeks during the dry season there without ever finding any water at all. The dirt was fair caked on him, and we didn't have no water to spare, except for drinking, so we just dug up an old spare set of clothes for him and told him he'd have to wait till we hit a creek before he could wash up. Well, sir, them clothes fit him like they was made for him—till we hit a river the next day and he'd jumped in and took a bath. I tell you I never seen anything like it. When he put those clothes we'd give him back on, they hung on him like a tent with holes in it. We had to dig him up another pair a good four sizes smaller!"

Bull McCoy shook his head sadly. "Windy," he said, "I'm afraid you and the truth will never have much in common, as they say."

"Who says?" Windy wanted to know.

"Well—anyone."

"They lie," said Windy. "It's getting so you can't trust what no one tells you any more at all."

"Amen," said Bull McCoy.

bit her lips. "I know my brother's gone, but I can't bring myself to tell my father."

AMHERST'S voice had a strange quiver as he interrupted. "Ah. Maria, I see you know the marshal?" There was a decided coolness in his tone.

Hatfield grinned. "Sure, Doc. I dunked her in the creek yesterday."

Amherst stiffened. He looked down at Maria whose impishly laughing eyes gave him little consolation. "I see," he said hang—" He chopped off the last word, looked back at Maria, and a sheepish grin came to his eyes. "Sorry, Maria," he apologized. "I've no right to get riled this way."

Maria put a hand on his saddle. "You haven't," she agreed. Her eyes lost their teasing look and shone with a message that brought a warm flush to Amherst's face. "Señor Hatfield—he's a Texas Ranger—is here to help Father." She put her hand to her mouth and turned to Hatfield, who shrugged.

"I reckon we can trust the doc," he said drily. "Besides, I was getting tired of hearing him call me Marshal." He held out his hand. "I'm Jim Hatfield, Doc."

Roger Amherst's eyes widened like those of a schoolboy on his first date. "The Lone Wolf!" He shook his head. "No wonder Peebles didn't have a chance!"

Jim eased the moment by asking Maria, "Is your father still going through with the *corrida*?"

Maria nodded. "We couldn't back out now." She turned as Don José joined her.

"But if your brother does not show up?" the Ranger persisted.

"There will be an Amontillo entrant in the *corrida*," the girl said, her voice low, determined.

Don José shook his head. "Senor Hatfield is right, Maria. Ortega will not come back. Not that I blame him. And who is there to take his place?"

Amherst said lightly, "Perhaps Maria is thinking of the masked *matador*, Don José."

Hatfield looked up. "The what?"

The doctor shrugged. "Oh, just some talk I've been hearing in the Mexican cantinas in town. You know how these things grow. A herder sees a shadow on a dark night while hurrying home and when he tells the story over a bottle of wine it's become the ghost of someone killed in that vicinity. The story grows and changes from cantina to cantina."

The Ranger persisted, "What's that got to do with a masked *matador*?"

Roger Amherst looked sorry he had mentioned it. "Hell, there's a story going around that a masked man has been seen practicing *faenas* and passes with the Amontillo bulls at midnight. Down by the river when the rest of the valley is asleep."

Maria nodded. "I have heard such stories, too, Señor."

Don José shrugged. "I, too—right here among the workers." He made a distasteful gesture.

"Anvone bother to check on those stories?" Hatfield asked.

Don José spread his hands. "But who would believe?" He smiled. "The Amontillo bulls, Señor Hatfield, are dangerous enough in broad daylight. To get into an enclosure with them at night—" He smiled, as though the very thought was foolish.

Hatfield, "Yeah—I see what you mean." He swung up into saddle again. "Well, I won't bother Don Felipe, seeing as how he's not feeling well." He turned to Amherst. "Riding back, Doc?"

Roger Amherst nodded. He turned and nodded good-by, and swung after the Ranger. They rode under the archway and down the road until it curved along Bull Creek, hidden by the shadows and the line of trees.

Here Hatfield said, "You ride on, Doc. I think I'll take a swing north and look around. See you at the Boston Bean for breakfast."

Amherst reminded, "The fiesta starts tomorrow. I'm glad you'll be there. And —I'm sorry for acting like a jealous schoolboy back there."

Hatfield slapped him across the back. "Forget it, Doc. Like you said, 'For every man there's a place he'll call home.' I'm glad you found yours."

He swung Goldy away, splashed across the creek. He was not aware of the shadowy rider who waited until the doctor faded down the trail toward the town before moving across the road and following Hatfield himself.

CHAPTER VIII

Blood on the Saddle

CLIMBING over the far rim of the Barrier, the moon was a misshapen blob of orange. Rising, it lost the reddish tint and became yellow and less misshapen and clearly smaller. A cool wind flowed in from the eastern highlands, sharpening the soft night. The dark blue sky was spat-

tered with blazing stars.

Circling in a wide arc, Jim Hatfield came to the meeting of the Caliente and the Bull and from here he could look down the long sweep of valley to where the Bull finally cut its gorge through the distant rim to the coast. Behind him the ground rose in steep slope to level off to Mesquite Basin.

Sitting his saddle, he let his eyes follow the starshine on the tumbling rill that was Rio Caliente during the dry spell. And as he sat there he felt a chill run down his spine, called up by something beyond the reaches of his mind. He turned, his attention moving to the shadows at his back.

Goldy snorted. Hoofs rang on stone. Hatfield swung back. The dark blobs of shadow along the creek bed had lain still under his searching gaze; now one of them was moving. It looked like a horse, rearing, fighting something that held it fast.

The Ranger frowned, forgetting the nameless feeling of something behind him. His eyes narrowed, he rode forward toward the lunging shadow.

Close up he saw that it was a black horse, its reins caught between two rocks on the edge of the stream bed. The animal ceased its frantic plunging as Hatfield rode up, and stood still, muscles quivering. The whites of the animal's eyes gleamed in the moonlight.

The Ranger dismounted and walked to the trapped animal. The black jerked wildly again on its reins, then turned with bared teeth.

Hatfield paused. "Something scared you, feller?" He talked softly, trying to place this saddled animal which evidently had got loose from its rider. The black seemed familiar. He got in closer, his soothing voice working on the trembling gelding, and then he saw the dried blood across the animal's chest, the long, wicked slash.

"No wonder you're jumpy," he muttered. His gaze ran along the animal's withers and a faint shock held him. The brand etched on the black's left shoulder was the Amontillo brand—an "A" with the cross bar extended at both ends and fashioned into a crude sabre. And now he knew where he had seen this animal before. This was the horse that had carried Ortega Amontillo out of the valley!

The Lone Wolf kept up his soothing talk and in minutes he had overcome the black's trembling fear enough for him to come in close and run his hand along the quivering flank.

"Knife slash," he muttered. "Blood on the saddle, too." His eyes were cold. "Looks like Ortega came back, as his sister said he would. But someone got him before he could get home!" He turned to Goldy. "I've got a hunch—"

Fifty paces beyond he saw the shadow move; moonlight glinted on steel! In that thin fraction of a second he drew and fired, two shots that merged into one thunderous blast.

A knife whispered past his face. Amigo screamed as the knife was buried in his throat. The black jerked and lashed out even as he fell backward. A shod hoof glanced off Jim Hatfield's head. The Lone Wolf fell face forward without seeing the results of his shots.

Goldy whirled, facing the shadows. A man made noise for a few moments, low, moaning sounds that dribbled into the silence. After an interval Goldy walked to the Ranger, lying still on his face. Beyond him Amigo had collapsed, only one ear still twitching.

Goldy whinnied softly.

A hundred yards upslope along the Caliente two riders appeared. They came down fast, guns drawn.

The chunky rider said, "Well, I'll be damned, Kelso. That sorrel's the one Barker was fooling with when the marshal gave him a going over!"

Goldy tried to whirl away as they closed in. The man called Kelso closed in and caught him by the bridle. The sorrel turned with bared teeth and Kelso, snarling, drew his Colt and laid it hard across the sorrel's jaw. Goldy jerked back, and the man dallied several turns of the reins around his saddle horn.

"That'll hold you," he snarled.

THE other rider, Trask, had dismounted. He stood over Hatfield's unconscious form, his hard face breaking into pleased grin. "Well, well—looks like we hit the jackpot heading this way tonight, Kelso. This is the new marshal!"

Kelso was looking toward the shadows. "Someone out there, Trask."

The chunky Trask walked over while Kelso covered him with a rifle. Trask's voice cut through the night with sharp surprise. "Hell, it's the breed, Sho Smith." He bent over the dark shape on the ground, whistled softly. "Two slugs, both a hair apart, under his shirt pocket. Guess he didn't know what hit him!"

He got up, walked back to Hatfield and stepped beyond him to look down at the dead black horse. He made a quick examination while Kelso remained in saddle, his rifle held ready, his eyes roving the shadows. Trask finally straightened.

"Looks like the marshal found this black caught between the rocks here and was looking him over when the breed slipped up on him. Got in his throw, too—but got the cayuse instead."

Kelso said sharply, "Is the badge-toter dead?"

Trask shook his head. "Got kicked in the head, looks like." He made a short, involuntary motion with his shoulders. "I ain't taking chances with this hombre." He unbuckled the marshal's gunbelts and handed them up to Kelso who hung them from his saddlehorn.

Hatfield was beginning to stir. Swiftly Trask knotted his neckerchief around the Lone Wolf's wrists. Then he kicked him in the side.

"This is my turn, Marshal!" he sneered. "I'm calling the turn!"

Hatfield shook his head. His ears were ringing. He felt the kick in his side again and he looked up, his greenish eyes boring into Trask's. The heavy man licked his lips and backed away a little, sliding his Colt into his palm.

"Get up!" he snarled nervously. "We're riding!" He glanced at Kelso. "Reckon Gray would like to have a talk with him?"

Kelso nodded.

Jim Hatfield got to his feet. His head spun dizzily and he felt the blood trickle down his cheek and into a corner of his mouth. It had a salty taste.

He was lucky at that, he thought grimly. Lucky that the black's hoof had struck him a glancing blow, instead of connecting squarely.

Kelso untied Goldy and tossed Hatfield the sorrel's reins. "You ride him. But no fast moves!" He held the marshal's rifle across his saddle.

Trask mounted and swung in beside them. He looked back at Sho Smith. "What about him, Kelso?" he asked. "We gonna leave him that way?"

Kelso shrugged. "Hell with him!" he said callously. . . .

A mist-reddened sun poked its nose over the far hills and licked tongues of pale light across Mesquite Basin. In front of the Three Spade's bunkhouse riders were climbing onto saddled animals—hard, gun-hung men, waiting for their boss to come out and join them.

Farnum Gray had shaved and put on a clean shirt for the occasion, a concession induced by the pleasant anticipation of having Amontillo Acres handed him on the silver platter of Don Felipe's humbled honor.

There was a fly in the ointment, but he would handle that later. At the moment he was standing in the bunkhouse, looking down at Jim Hatfield, who was sitting with hands securely tied behind him on a near bunk.

Barker was sitting on the bunk across from him, a rifle within arm's reach. His entire left side was bandaged tightly, and pain accented the malevolence in Jim Hatfield's eyes.

Peebles, his mouth puffed out of shape, sat at a small table playing pinochle with Kelso, who had a sullen, half-defiant look around his mouth.

Gray's tone had the smooth assurance of a man who feels he holds all the cards. "You'll talk, Marshal—when we get back." His clean shave emphasized the softness of his face, the sagging jowls. "I said you weren't big enough to beat this outfit!"

FROM the table Peebles said indistinctly, "Why wait, Farnum? Let us beat it out of him for you!"

"Beat what out of him?" Gray snapped.

Peebles looked confused. "About the land grant!" he mumbled. "You said either he had it, or he knew who had!"

"Why let that worry you now?" Kelso said. "You didn't give a hang about it before."

Gray whirled on him. "I'll do the thinking and worrying around here!" he snapped. "You just obey orders." His face flushed. "Long as Amontillo didn't file that grant, this was free graze. Under the homestead laws this is open to claim. The Amontillos lived here so long they never thought to file that grant at the Statehouse. But now someone's got the bright idea of stealing it, or the marshal here wouldn't have been making his play for it. That means someone has plans for cutting in on my play!"

He swung back to the Ranger, recovering his composure. "Well, we're on our way to the fiesta! This is the day of the *corrida*—when the Amontillos match their brand of bullfighting—and their honor—against anyone in the valley. Well, this time the prize is Amontillo Acres—and Don Felipe hasn't got an entrant!"

Hatfield said slowly, "You're pretty sure of that?" He was thinking of the blood on Amigo's saddle.

Gray nodded. "And even if he has, I haven't Felipe's kind of pride." His sneer emphasized his opinion of the Amontillos. "We're taking over Amontillo Acres, win or lose at the *corrida* today!" He looked at the two men playing cards. "Kelso," he said sharply, "I'll be expecting you to make sure this tool of Ryerson's is still here when we get back!"

He went out and Jim Hatfield heard the mounted men wheel and head downvalley. For long moments after that no one spoke. Barker leaned over and picked up the rifle and held it across his lap. He kept looking at the prisoner, murder building up slowly in his eyes.

Kelso's voice was sharp, irritated. "All right, Sad—your deal!" He didn't like being left behind with two cripples. He watched the ex-deputy shuffle, his mouth pulled down in sour disgust. Peebles's face was so puffed he looked like a gopher with nuts stuffed in both cheeks.

Out in the shed Goldy, stripped of saddle and bridle, was tied by a short halter rope to a pole. The big sorrel kept moving restlessly. Some nameless sense, born out of long and close association with Hatfield, told him the big man was in danger. Several times he jerked at the rope, trying to break it. Finally he moved close, his teeth taking hold of the rope as it sagged. Quietly he began to work on it.

The minutes went by. The sun pulled up out of the mists and beat its heat down into the Basin.

Peebles tossed his cards down disgustedly. "Need a drink of water," he mumbled. He got up and walked to the pail set on the pot-bellied stove.

Hatfield watched him pull up a dipperful and slobber the water between puffed lips. "I'd like a drink," he said.

Peebles turned and looked at him. A mean light came into his eyes. Kelso swung around to watch.

"Sure," the beanpole mumbled. He scooped up a dipperful and walked to the Ranger, who eyed him coolly. "Here," Peebles said, and swung the dipper for Jim's mouth.

The Lone Wolf jerked back and the dipper flew out of Peebles's hand. Peebles cursed and Kelso sneered, "Come back here and sit down. You're still wobbly as a sick calf."

Peebles was standing unsteadily, but more from frustration and anger than weakness. He turned and walked back to the card table.

Barker said softly, "Try it again, Sad. Maybe he'll make a break!"

The blond gunman had his finger on the trigger, and the Ranger knew he was waiting for him to make that move. Barker wanted an excuse, however thin, to shoot him. That was the reason he had insisted that the captive's legs be left unbound.

Kelso said sharply, "You heard what Gray said, Barker!" He stopped and dropped his hand to his gun, frowning.

THE sound of a horse circling the shack was loud and distinct in the morning stillness.

Kelso got to his feet. "Sounds like one of the boys rode back!" But he wasn't quite convinced. He kept his hand on his gun as he walked toward the door.

Jim Hatfield was tensed. For a brief instant he had caught sight of Goldy through the small, dirty window across the room—Goldy trotting toward the shack with a bit of frayed halter rope dangling from his neck.

Peebles followed Kelso toward the door, less suspicious than his companion. He was curious to see who had come back.

Hatfield gathered his feet under him as Kelso stepped out and suddenly yelled. Through the open doorway he got a glimpse of the sorrel rearing over the man who was trying to fall back toward the door, dragging at his gun.

Then Jim Hatfield lunged across the short space to Barker who had turned his head at Kelso's yell. The broad-shouldered Ranger rammed his shoulder into Barker's busted ribs and the tow-headed man said, "A-a-ah!" and went out, falling limply across the cot.

Hatfield whirled. Peebles was rooted about two feet from the doorway, his Colt drawn. For a bad moment the ex-deputy was divided between the vision of flashing, deadly hoofs, by Kelso's choked, gurgling screams and the figure of Hatfield plunging toward him.

He didn't get a chance to make his decision.

Hatfield kicked him in the groin. Peebles's long fingers tightened spasmodically and his Colt stuttered into the floor, one of the slugs ripping through his boot and taking his big toe with it. He didn't immediately feel the pain of it. He was bending down the middle as Hatfield drove his knee into his face. That finished messing his face completely.

Goldy was standing over Kelso's crumpled, bloody body when the Ranger came to the door. The sorrel whinnied softly and Hatfield looked down at the gunman, remembering the blow Kelso had hit Goldy.

Faintly, brought to him on a shift of the gentle wind, he heard the bells of San Marcos tolling. The day of the *corrida!* Down there the man he had come to help was about to lose the heritage of a hundred years. The Lone Wolf smiled grimly. Neither Gray nor the man who had possession of the old Amontillo land grant would get away with it.

He walked back into the bunkhouse, his eyes searching for something to work with—something to cut the cords that bound his hands behind him. The stove caught his attention. There was a black metal flange around it, serving as a bumper. A section of this had been broken, leaving a ragged edge. He turned and knelt with his back to the stove, feeling with his fingers until he located the rough metal. Then he started to saw the rope across it.

He got his hands free as Barker stirred. The man made a low moan in his throat and turned over. His pain-glazed eyes barely registered as Jim Hatfield crossed the room to the wall where Kelso had hung his Colts. Nor did he make a move as Hatfield, with the guns buckled around his flat hips, bent briefly beside him to pick up his rifle.

In the barn the Lone Wolf found his saddle and gear. Five minutes later he was mounted on Goldy and heading down along the Rio Caliente.

CHAPTER IX

A Long Time Waiting

AVENIDA DE LOS TOROS streamed with *aficionados* heading for the adobe stadium. The tiered seats were filling rapidly for the event of the year

—the *Corrida de Los Toros.* The bulls had been picked for their size and stamina—two bulls for each contestant—and the business of drawing straws for the bulls each man would face had been disposed of.

Don Felipe sat in the judge's seat, flanked by Sebastian Fuego who owned the Coronado Hotel, and Alonzo DeVallez, a prominent citizen of Nueva Valencia. These three had sat as judges before and no one questioned their fairness.

Don Felipe's face was like stone. His fingers were curled and their swollen joints still pained him, but the pain was as nothing compared with the stab in his heart, the bitter wound to his pride.

Ortega had not shown up. From the very beginning, the evening Ortega had not returned from town, Don Felipe had known that his son had run away. But some stubborn part of him had hoped. Now even that last shred of faith was gone.

Below him, in the *Plaza de Toros,* Severino Valdez was walking across the arena, his crimson cape, edged with gold, catching the sun. He walked with a swagger, a short, powerful man who obviously had fought in the bull ring before.

Several sections over Farnum Gray, flanked by a half-dozen hard-eyed gunmen, was settled back enjoying a cigar.

Don Felipe tried to locate his brother-in-law and his daughter among the faces in the stands. They had parted from him as he had walked up to the judge's place with his two companions.

The crowd was getting restless, impatient. Loud *"holas!"* were flung back and forth across the ring. The crowd was still predominantly Mexican, but even among these were many who had come to see the Amontillos humbled. Don Felipe felt it, and in the low ebb of his bitterness, he had a clear-eyed look at himself, at the blind, closed trap the Amontillos had forged out of what once had been colorful tradition.

The *Corrida de Toros,* he now saw, had become a maw into which was fed Amontillo blood for the sake of a cold and senseless thing called Amontillo honor. Into this maw he had fed Juan, his first-born son, and Ortega, slight and sensitive, unable to face the bulls, had been driven from his home.

In that moment Don Felipe cared little that he was to lose Amontillo Acres!

Down under the seats, in the dressing room, Roger Amherst and Don José were facing Maria Amontillo. The doctor's voice was shocked.

"But you can't go in there, Maria! It—it's unthinkable that a girl—"

"Why?" Maria was dressed as a *matador,* her slim figure almost boyishly wiry. Marez, one time *matador* and keeper of the Amontillo bulls, stood silently behind her.

"I have practiced with the Amontillo bulls for a long time, Roger," she said defiantly. "As long as I can remember Marez has been my teacher. First, it was the calves, and later the heifers that I fought. The pride of my family, Señor Amherst,"—and in her anger she grew formal—"I grew up with it in my ears, in my eyes, in my blood. Perhaps, as my father often said, I should have been born a boy."

Don José's face was white. "Your mother must have known. She told me, before she died, that the sword of Don Carlos was the curse of the Amontillos."

Maria shrugged. "Curse or pride, Don José, what does it matter now? You know of the wager my father has made, pledged with his solemn word. There must be an Amontillo in the arena today. And I am glad I can take the place of Ortega."

"The masked *matador,*" the doctor muttered helplessly. "Then the tales I heard in the cantinas had truth?"

Maria nodded. "Of what may happen in the bull ring, Roger," she said softly, "I am not afraid. But of what may happen after—" She shook her head. "I wish the Señor Hatfield had come back. Something must have happened."

BEHIND them the door closed, and with its closing a quiet voice said, "All hell could not have kept me away, Señorita. Not today!"

"Señor Hatfield!" The girl's eyes lighted

as the tall, broad-shouldered Ranger joined them.

He looked at her, his bloodied face grim, but softened by the slow smile of admiration that broke the hard curl of his lips.

"I guess I'm not too surprised, Señorita Maria. Somehow I knew you'd be in that ring today."

Dr. Amherst said: "What happened to you, Hatfield?"

Outside the bugles blared, heralding the beginning of the *corrida*. Maria put her hand on the Ranger's arm. "Let us watch from behind the *barrera*. Let us see how Severino Valdez performs, *si*?"

Don José shook his head. "I'll be up in the seats, with your father," he said stiffly.

Amherst said tightly, "I'll watch." His eyes had a sick look in them. He was remembering last year when her brother Juan had leaned too close and a foot of wicked horn had entered the young matador's stomach and spilled his entrails across the sand.

The announcer spoke his piece, introducing Valdez who bowed to the crowd, walked across to the judge's stand, smiled mockingly at Don Felipe's graven face, then turned and tossed his cape to Farnum Gray who leaned over and caught it somewhat ungracefully. The ex-lawyer waved to the man in the ring and settled back, contented.

A bugle blew and a door in the arena swung back. Out of the dark tunnel came a rangy black bull, high in the shoulders, thin in the hind quarters.

The *picadors* did their work well, tiring the bull, prodding him, sapping the high wild peak of energy. After them came the *bandilleros*. Valdez appeared briefly, but his cape work was unspectacular. He took no chances, and the crowd booed a little.

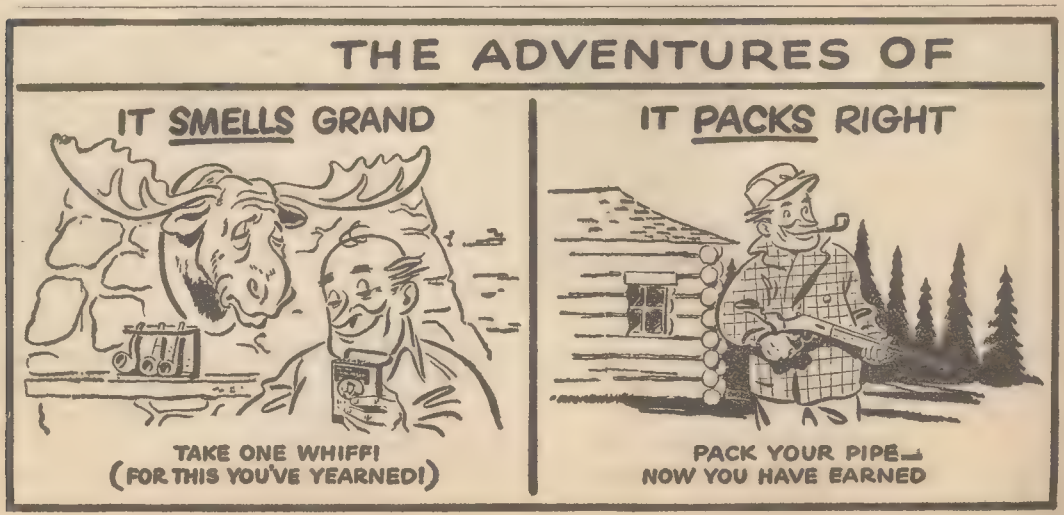
When the moment came to work alone, he showed his true colors. He was afraid of those needle-sharp horns and the crowd stamped their displeasure. Gray settled down in his seat, frowning, chewing on his cigar. Beside him Lefty sneered, "Yellow!"

Valdez killed his bull quickly, keeping well away from that lowered head. He killed like a butcher.

The man assigned to the task dragged the body of the bull away and then the crowd stilled, waiting for the Amontillo entrant. Don Felipe slumped forward. The announcer came to the center of the arena, cleared his throat, hesitated. Then he said clearly:

"Because Ortega Amontillo has been hurt in an accident, Maria Amontillo will take his place here today!"

Don Felipe came erect, his black eyes burning, as Maria came out from behind the *barrera* and walked toward the judge's stand. A shocked stillness gripped the spectators. Gray sat stiffly. Beside him a gunhand he called Lefty muttered, "I'll be damned!"



Maria walked to the spot below the judge's stand, proud, erect, confident. In her hands she held the sword of Don Carlos, the blade that for a hundred years had hung over the mantle in her father's house. She held the blade in both hands and lifted it to eye level, her glance meeting her father's stricken gaze.

Then she turned and walked away, while the stands came alive with cheers.

The bugle hushed the crowd. Out of the dark tunnel trotted Maria's first bull, a black and tan brute heavier in the shoulders than Valdez's animal, more deliberate in his charges.

The *picadors* and the *bandilleros* did their work. Maria watched from behind the *barrera*, coolly studying the bull.

Hatfield let his eyes drift from the savagery within that arena to the sea of faces in the stands. He picked out Gray and his men, and a thin smile curled his lips.

The *bandilleros* withdrew. The bull made a short rush after them, then turned challenging the empty arena with a sharp toss of his head. Two *bandilleras* hung from the enormous hump of shoulder muscles.

MARIA walked out. Slim and boyish and completely unafraid. She was looking up at her father, ignoring the bull that pawed the ground, lowered his head, and charged.

Her cape hung almost limp, and at the last moment she whirled it around and away and the bull went by, the tip of his right horn less than four inches from her slim waist.

The crowd stood up and roared.

The tension in Jim Hatfield eased. This girl had the grace, the courage and the born instinct of a great *toreador*. She handled this huge, charging beast like a baby, and the crowd went wild with every pass.

She killed it cleanly, leaning over that deadly horn to drive the sword of Don Carlos deep into the soft spot between the huge head and the thick hump behind it.

It took the crowd a long time to quiet down, regain some semblance of order.

Valdez looked up at the stands, his swarthy face coffee-colored. His second animal was *El Rojo*, the terrible roan-colored brute, the pride of the Amontillo pens. The rangy bull tore out of the tunnel, slewed around, and looked across that arena, small red eyes seeking something to charge, to maul.

Valdez cringed as he witnessed that enormous bull charge the *picadors*, hook a horn into the side of one of the blindfolded horses, and toss it like a stuffed toy. The *picadors*, working grimly, wore down that red devil, and the *bandilleros* did their share. But it was still a savage engine of destruction that ranged around the barricade after they withdrew, seeking with unquenchable vitality its tormentors.

[*Turn page*]

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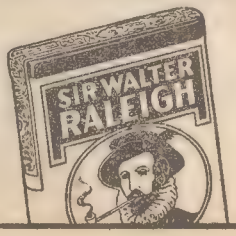
SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.



It costs no more to get the best!

The crowd waited for Valdez, then began calling. The Mexican import looked up at Gray, nodded nervously. But his step dragged as he slid out from behind the shielding barrier and faced the restless bull.

El Rojo turned and charged. Valdez fluttered his cape and dodged back. The crowd booed. The huge roan brute whirled, sliding on its hind legs, and came back, hooking its left horn as it charged in under the *muleta.*

The needle point caught Valdez in the thigh, ripped him from knee to crotch and sent him spinning. Immediately the mounted *picadors* closed in, driving the bull back, fighting him, while others rushed in and dragged the moaning *matador* into the dressing rooms below the stands.

The crowd was silent. The big beast ranged along the arena, waiting for anyone who dared enter within his range.

Don Felipe jerked to his feet as Maria walked out from behind the *barrera.* *"No!"* His face was haggard. His pride was crumbling about him as he saw his daughter walking out to face this savage killer. *"No!"*

Maria stood coolly, eyes on the big bull that had turned to face her. Beside Jim Hatfield, young Dr. Amherst's lips were moving in silent prayer.

El Rojo charged! Feet planted firmly, Maria let him rush past, following the quick, graceful swirl of her cape. Again and again she made him pass, the crowd roaring in unison. Finally the spectators chanted: "Kill him—kill him—"

Maria waited while the tired bull, head sagging low, pawed the ground less than five yards away. Then the brute charged. Maria leaned in over the wicked right horn, so close that the tip slashed her flowing sleeve like a razor. But the sword of Amontillo sank deep.

El Rojo's momentum carried him forward ten paces, then he went down to his knees. He fell slowly, the gleaming hilt quivering in his neck.

The crowd went wild. *"Bravos"* and *"Viva Maria, Viva Amontillo!"* filled the air.

Maria was standing, facing the judge's stand. Roger Amherst rushed across the arena and dragged her away. The judges made no announcement. Don Felipe sat with head bowed. . . .

THE crowd had filed out of the *Plaza de Toros* when Don Felipe walked through the opening into the arena. He walked like an old man, heavy of step, a little uncertain. Behind him Farnum Gray called out, "Don Felipe!"

The old Don turned. He was alone in the arena where the blood of Amontillo bulls was still bright in the sand. Alone except for Gray and the half-dozen silent men who came through the entrance after him.

Don Felipe's shoulders drew back. "You will leave the valley now?" he demanded. "You will leave my family in peace?"

The ex-lawyer sneered. "You're a fool, Don Felipe! Did you think I'd let a thing like a bullfight stop me from taking Amontillo Acres?"

Don Felipe's voice was bitter. "But your word, Señor Gray—"

"Is worth only what value I wish to put on it!" the rancher sneered. "No more. And right at this moment I—"

He stopped, his eyes widening in sharp surprise. A tall, wide-shouldered man had stepped out from behind the *barrera.* A man with a star shining brightly on his shirt. But the star was not Ryerson's tin badge. It was a symbol Gray and the hard men with him recognized—a symbol that had stopped many men before him. It was the star of Texas set in a silver circle—the badge of a Texas Ranger!

The man wearing it walked slowly forward, the butts of his Colts jutting ominously. Gray wet his lips. "You're a hard man to kill, lawman!" he whispered.

He had just seen the work and the planning of more than a year collapse in this arena and now there was only violence left as a means to gaining Amontillo Acres. Don Felipe he discounted—the gaunt man was standing a little to one side, sensing the grim pattern about to be played out. Only the big man with the star was an obstacle, but Gray had a half-dozen picked

men at his side, and in one desperate impulse he made his decision.

He broke sharply back, callously using one of his men as cover, and slipped his hand inside his coat for the small-bore gun he carried in a special under-arm holster.

Jim Hatfield's slug dropped the man in front of him, his second spun Gray wildly around as he drew his gun. The lawyer started to run toward the exit, staggering, all thought of facing that grim lawman driven from him. Behind him the Colts made a sharp, stuttering roar, punctuated by the high whipcrack of a rifle. But Gray didn't see the results of that brief fight.

Trask and Lefty were dead. Two others lay badly hurt, the other two Three Spades men had their hands raised, quitting cold.

Hatfield waited while Dr. Roger Amherst, rifle in hand, joined him." You two," the Ranger snapped to the unhurt gunsters. "Hit saddle and clear the valley. Or I'll come looking for both of you!"

The two men turned and left the arena, not even glancing back. The Ranger walked over to Gray, who was moaning softly, and kneeled beside him. "Gray!" he said coldly. "Where's young Amontillo?"

Gray rolled his head. "Left valley—Kelso saw—him"

Hatfield frowned. The man was telling the truth. Behind him Don Felipe's voice questioned sharply, "Ranger, where is my son?"

Hatfield got up, looked at the old, tired man. "I guess I know, now!" he said.

Men were spilling back into the arena, drawn by the gunfire. Grimly Hatfield shoved those crowding, questioning men aside as he headed out of the bull ring.

The Crystal Palace was strangely quiet when Jim Hatfield walked in. His quick glance ranged down that long, empty room to pick up the lone figure standing at the end of the long bar. As though he had been waiting, knowing the Ranger would come.

Ryerson turned as Hatfield paused briefly just inside the swinging doors. Outside the sounds of fiesta had a tinny, faraway sound. There was no celebration in his room—only a delayed reckoning.

RYERSON had shed his coat. The holstered guns on his slim hips struck an odd note, for they didn't blend with the gambler's striped silk shirt, the neatly knotted string tie.

"I've been waiting, Hatfield!" Ryerson said quietly. "A long time."

Hatfield frowned. "For what?"

"For this moment." The gambler's lips held a small, thin curl of hate, the first clear emotion the Lone Wolf had seen in this man. "I knew who you were the moment you walked into this office," he added harshly. "Do you want to know why?"

The Ranger waited.

"You've got a reputation, Hatfield. You scare men—even men like Breck. But your rep doesn't scare me. I've waited five years for this—five years of practice, of improving my speed. I'm going to kill you, Hatfield. And do you know why?"

Hatfield's voice was rough. "You talk a lot, Ryerson. You tell me why."

"Bat Ryerson was my brother," the gambler whispered sharply. "Five years ago you killed him, up in the Panhandle!"

Hatfield's eyes narrowed. He was moving toward Ryerson, his attention drawn by some faint shifting of light on the door behind the gambler. As if that panel had moved slightly.

"Bat was a bank robber and a killer," he said flatly. "Looks like you followed in his shoes. I've come for Ortega Amontillo —and the Amontillo land grant!"

Ryerson's eyes widened. "Two good guesses," he said softly. "Only you'll never live to see either one of them." He licked his lips as the Ranger came closer, and his next words seemed for his own benefit, as if he suddenly needed to bolster his confidence. "Five years I've waited—and now I'm going to kill you. The great Jim Hatfield!" His lips curled harshly. "Because I hold a little joker, the difference of a split second that—"

He stepped back sharply, and in that instant the office door flung open and Pedro pulled the trigger of the rifle he held at waist level. Ryerson's hands dropped to

his butts, and the holsters, specially designed with hidden spring hinges, parted to the pressure of his palms. Long practice, combined with a natural speed and skill, had made the drawing almost instinctive—the parting of the holsters allowing him to fire without wasting the split second required to lift his guns clear before leveling them.

But even then the Lone Wolf's guns beat him! Pedro whirled and fell, dead before he hit the floor.

Ryerson shuddered. Some terrible effort of will kept him on his feet with two slugs in his chest. His eyes were wide and bright and his teeth bit through his lips, bringing blood. He tried to get another shot at the big, rock steady figure standing in front of him. But the effort was never completed. The last thing he saw, bright and mocking, was the star set in the silver circle on Hatfield's shirt—the grim symbol of Ranger authority!

Hatfield found Ortega, still alive, on the couch in Ryerson's office. The land grant was in Ryerson's small safe. He was bending over young Amontillo when Doc Amherst and Maria followed Don Felipe into the room. The young medico made a quick examination while Maria and the old Don stood ashen-faced, looking down on the slim, feverish man on the cot.

"I think he'l live," the doctor whispered. "We'll move him to your place, Don Felipe, as soon as we can. . . ."

When Jim Hatfield rode out through the adobe archway the next day, the sword of Amontillo was on the wall over the mantlepiece. Maria and Dr. Amherst were with Don José on the wide veranda, waving good-by. Don Felipe had remained in the house, at the bedside of Ortega.

Five hours later Hatfield reined in and looked back. The Apache trail snaked across the Barrier ahead of him—behind him Nueva Valencia and Amontillo Acres.

The bells of San Marcos were ringing, reaching the big, grim man on the golden sorrel. The tolling had a peaceful sound.

"The Valley of the Bulls," Jim murmured. *"Adios."* ● ● ●

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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The bear reared on her hind legs, looking Everett over

Let the HATE DIE

By GILES A. LUTZ

Monte Somner had to make the choice—
friendship or vengeance!

VALIANCE had not changed much in the three years since Monte Somner had seen it. The stores were still a drab gray, and no new ones had been built. The church had added a steeple, and Arnold had built a wooden awning over his portion of the walk.

For three years, Monte had been on the restless move, trying to escape his memories. Always before, he had hated change. He was a man who wanted his roots down deep. He thought savagely, Dana Everett changed that. Dana Everett had changed Monte's thinking, his entire way of living.

The hatred Monte felt for the man was a

sour, hard lump in his stomach. He had probing fingers that reached into all parts of him. The very thought of the name distorted his vision, making objects hazy before him.

He shut his eyes and thought calmly, Dana Everett is back. After three years, he has returned.

Just two months ago, Monte had heard that Everett had reappeared in Valiance. Monte had leisurely made his own way here, not even admitting to himself the purpose of it. He wondered if Everett's surprise at seeing him would be mixed with fear, he wondered what Mrs. Everett would say. The thought of her balled his hands into hard, solid knots.

He jerked on the reins of his pack-animal. All he owned in the world was on his riding horse and pack-animal. He looked ten years older than his twenty-five years, and his eyes looked as though they had forgotten how to smile. The chin and nose were cut with bold, decisive strokes, and the lips were a thin, determined line. The eyes were smoky-colored but with a dull, dead look. He looked hard and capable and dangerously mean.

A man hailed him from the door of an office, and Monte hauled up his horse. He nodded, with no expression on his face.

Sheriff Ed Gibson said, "Get down, Monte."

Monte did not miss the note of command, but still he sat there.

Gibson said, "It's been a long time since we've talked, Monte. The first time I've seen you in three years, and you think I'm going to let you pass me up? Get down, Monte." His voice carried no more volume, but the added tough note was unmistakable.

MONTE could ignore it and move on —or rather, start to move on. He was not sure how far he would get. Gibson did not throw orders around loosely. When he gave one, he expected it to be carried out.

Monte's lips pulled away, baring his teeth. It was not even a good imitation of a grin. He swung out of saddle and knotted the reins about the tie-rack. He was deliberate about it, making the time consumption an affront to Gibson.

Gibson watched with an expressionless face. He was a head shorter than Monte and correspondingly stockier. He looked mild and easy-going until one looked at the eyes. The eyes were a deep blue, verging on gray, and a hard flame flickered behind them.

He snapped, "Come inside, Monte."

Monte followed him into the office. Gibson shut the door, hooked his toe around the leg of a chair and kicked it toward Monte. He said softly, "Wish I could say I was glad to see you back."

It was odd how that hurt Monte. At one time, he could have ridden down these streets, and every man in town would have joyfully hailed him. He wondered if Gibson spoke for himself or for the town.

He said sullenly, "What's puckering you, Ed?"

"You," Gibson snapped. "Dana Everett returns after three years, and a couple of weeks later you ride along. It isn't coincidence, is it, Monte?" Those fiery eyes searched Monte's face, and he added, "I thought not. I'd heard there had been a change in you, Monte. A change I was sorry to hear about. I saw it in your face when you rode down the street. I see it more now."

Monte stared sullenly at the floor. He started to say something, then clamped his mouth shut.

Gibson said, "Dana bought his old place back, Monte. Did you hear that?"

Monte hadn't. He masked the gleam in his eyes. It would make locating Everett easy. His thoughts dredged up the past. Four years ago, Everett had come out of the East. He had bought the old Bar 2 D, a small ranch, and had hired Monte to work for him. Monte had been the foreman and crew.

In a year's short time, a strong bond had been built between the two men. It had been more like a partnership than a boss-hired hand relation. Everett had had little knowledge of running a cow ranch. He had left that up to Monte, blindly

trusting every suggestion. It had been a good year, a year that Monte did not like to think about. It made the hurt deeper, it flamed the hatred higher.

Gibson said, "Mrs. Everett didn't return with him, Monte. He didn't mention her, and I didn't bring it up."

His eyes were as sharp as an Arctic wind. It was effort for Monte to keep emotion off his face. She had not been Mrs. Everett when he had known her. She had been Thea Courcier, a member of a traveling show that had appeared in Valiance. Monte had known her for only three weeks, but he had packed a lot of living into those three weeks. He had expected it to last forever, but Dana Everett had broken that up.

He could see her now, for time only sharpened the memory of her, instead of dulling it. Her eyes had been deep, the inner fire in her lighting them. He remembered how they had glowed at him; he remembered the curve of her chin and throat. There had been promise in her eyes. A thousand times he had desperately told himself he had seen it.

But one morning, she had gone with Dana Everett. There had been a long letter from Dana telling Monte he was sorry, asking Monte to understand. The hatred was a harsh fist, twisting Monte's insides. A man never understood a thing like that, and he never forgave.

He realized with a start that Gibson was talking. "It was odd that Dana never came back until now." Gibson rolled a cigarette, never taking his eyes off Monte. "He sent back word to sell his ranch. I didn't think we would ever see him here again." He paused, then said with abrupt harshness, "Why did you come back, Monte?"

HE DID not give Monte time to answer.

"I know why, Monte," he said sharply. "I've looked at the change in you. I've seen such changes work on a man before. You came back to kill Dana."

Monte tried to deny it. The evil thought that had been hiding in the back of his brain blossomed into full flower, filling his head. It was exactly what he was going to do. Then maybe the mocking pictures would fade. He stared straight ahead, his face impassive. Only the glittering in his eyes showed any sign of life.

"It wouldn't be wise," Gibson said quietly. "If anything happens to Dana, I'm holding you responsible. I'll be coming after you." His grin was only a bleak parody. "As sure as hell, I'll come after you, Monte. It puts you in a kind of spot, doesn't it? You'd better see that nothing happens to Dana."

Monte's swearing was low and vicious. Gibson meant exactly what he said. He pushed to his feet, and he looked old and tired. Only the hating in his eyes still had vigor.

Gibson sighed and said, "You two had something pretty fine between you. It's too bad it's gone."

Monte snarled at him and plunged out of the door. Gibson had as effectively handcuffed him as though he had used actual manacles. For a moment, he toyed with the thought of making a fast strike against Everett, then a faster departure. He let the idea slip out of his mind. He knew Gibson. The man would instantly be on his trail, and he would never let stop—until he had Monte Somner. There would never be any peace for Monte that way.

He moved slowly down the walk, his eyes unseeing. A man waited three brutal years for satisfaction, then it was denied him.

He thought wearily, I'll have to replenish my supplies before I leave town, and turned in at Gingery's General Store.

Gingery greeted him with enthusiasm. He was not as discerning a man as Gibson. He said, "You come back to be with Dana, Monte? That's good. He's trying to run the ranch by himself. I hear he's having plenty of trouble."

Monte remembered Dana Everett's awkwardness at so many tasks, and his lip corners half lifted as though in remembrance of a long forgotten grin. He said harshly, "That's tough."

Gingery missed the sarcasm in his tone. "He sure needs you, Monte. He evidently

didn't have much money left. He only bought a few head of stock. Now a stock-killing grizzly is in on him. I heard he's already lost a dozen head. He swears he's going to track down that grizzly and kill it." His grin invited Monte to share the joke. "Dana couldn't track a bull in hock-deep mud. You remember that, Monte?"

Monte remembered. He had spent a lot of hours trying to teach Dana to read sign. No, Dana Everett could not track. If he went after that grizzly, he would either not get within a mile of it, or he would blunder—

Wicked fire flamed in Monte's eyes as the thought struck him. Grizzlies were always dangerous. Many a good man had been killed by them. If something like that should happen to Dana Everett, how could Gibson blame Monte for it?

He said gruffly, "Maybe I'll ride out and see if I can give him a hand."

Gingery said heartily, "Nothing he'd like better, Monte."

Monte gave him a sardonic glance and walked outside. He untied the reins and swung into saddle. Gibson stood in the doorway, watching him ride away.

The old familiar road hit him hard. He remembered every foot of it. His face was a scowling mask as he pulled up before the house. It looked seedy and run-down. He could see that efforts at repair had been made, but there had been nothing systematic about it. Everett had always had an inclination to hop around unless he was held steady.

He lifted his voice in a hail, and Dana Everett came to the door. His face lighted at the sight of Monte, and he bounded across the porch. He stopped uncertainly as Monte's face remained frozen.

He said quietly, "Hello, Monte. I'm glad to see you again."

MONTE nodded to hide the hatred blazing in his eyes. His fingers itched to hold a gun. He forced himself to say calmly, "Hear you got a grizzly causing you trouble. Thought I might help you bag it before I leave this part of the country."

Everett's sigh was a wistful little whisper of sound. He was shorter than Monte, and not as big-boned. His face was full, and he never quite seemed to know what to do with his hands. His blue eyes used to be merry. Monte noticed they seemed dull and burned-out now.

Slowly Everett nodded. His eyes did not lose their puzzled look. "I'd like your help," he said quietly.

Monte got a few supplies out of Everett's stores, and Everett saddled his horse. He led the way to the grizzly's latest kill, and Monte noticed the way he rode, sag-shouldered and head hanging. He did not seem to be aware of anything that went on around him, and Monte could not help remembering the childlike interest this man had had in everything.

It was a dozen miles to where Dana Everett had found the carcass of the cow, and the country grew progressively rougher. Monte swung off at the kill. The animal's head had been crushed. The power of a grizzly's blow was an awesome thing. From the size of the tracks, this was a large bear.

Monte saw something else that narrowed his eyes. He saw two sets of smaller tracks, so faint as to be almost indistinguishable. This was a she grizzly with cubs, so she would be doubly dangerous.

He pointed out the tracks of the big bear to Everett. Everett had not seen the smaller tracks. The meandering tracks led to the west, and Monte squinted at the mountain range in that direction. It was tortuous country. Those mountains were gutted by a maze of narrow, crooked canyons, but he knew it as thoroughly as a man could know such twisty, confusing country.

It would be dangerous country into which to follow a grizzly. He kept his head down so that Everett could not see the gleam in his eyes.

He judged the kill to be over a day old. He rode slowly along the direction of the tracks, occasionally seeing one in some soft spot that kept him true. He nodded with grim satisfaction. It was a dozen miles to where those tortuous canyons

and gorges began, and the bear was going all the way.

The going became rockier, and he saw an occasional clawed tree or a dislodged stone that pointed his direction.

Finally he left his horse and pack animal and said, "We'd better take it on foot from here on."

He did not want to meet that grizzly on horseback. A man would have enough to do to manage himself, without having to fight a panicky horse.

His heart beat with a savage rhythm that shook his chest. He pulled his .30-30 out of its boot and saw Everett do the same. Everett's face was grave. It seemed strange seeing him without his usual grin.

Monte levered a cartridge into the chamber and heard the click of Everett's weapon. He led the way, moving cautiously as the walls of the canyons rose steadily and engulfed them. Each turn ahead might produce the grizzly.

He was trying to estimate the freshness of the tracks. When he decided the grizzly was near, he would send Everett ahead. Everett had never been too sure a shot, and Monte knew what accurate shooting it took to stop a grizzly.

Abruptly the canyon forked. Monte stood at the fork, studying the ground. He saw a blurred, half impression of a track in a bit of sand over rock. It looked more like a windscuff, and an inexperienced eye might pass it entirely. It was fresher than anything he had seen, and a little shiver touched him.

He raised his head and studied the two arms of the fork. Slowly, he looked at Everett and asked, "Remember this spot?"

Everett's eyes were puzzled.

Monte said with the right degree of impatience in his voice, "Sure you do. These arms make a circle and join together. I'll take the left hand one, and you go up the right. We'll cover more ground that way." He added gruffly, "You see something moving, you be damned sure it isn't me before you shoot."

He thought that was a clever touch. If Everett had any suspicions, that would quiet them.

EVERETT stared at him a long moment before he nodded. He moved along the right-hand arm without a backward glance.

Monte hurried for two hundred yards along the left-hand arm. These canyons did not join; they ran almost parallel, and the grizzly's track showed it had headed into the one Everett was following.

Monte angled up the sloping wall. He climbed swiftly, his savage exultation a spur that ignored loss of breath and trembling muscles. He came out on top, crossed over for a couple of hundred yards and cautiously peered into the canyon Everett was in.

He saw him moving slowly fifty yards ahead and below him. His head was alertly thrust forward, and he carried his rifle ready.

Monte stayed off of the sky-line, moving above and behind Everett. Occasionally, he risked a glance at the figure below him.

Everett had gone about four hundred yards when the canyon made a sharp bend. Monte moved hastily forward and peered down. He saw Everett turn the corner, saw the copse of scraggly alders not twenty-five yards ahead of the man.

Everett showed his lack of experience. He moved at the clump of trees without giving it the proper inspection. Monte saw the great dark shadow in the alders. He saw two smaller, frightened scurryings and knew the old bear had cuffed the cubs out of danger.

The bear reared on her hind legs, remaining motionless for a long moment, while she looked Everett over. He looked as though he were frozen, and Monte's eyes blazed. He knew how the shock of seeing an animal that big could freeze a man.

The bear's great bellow rocked through the canyon. She dropped to all fours and moved with appalling rapidity. She covered ten of those twenty-five yards before Everett got his rifle to his shoulder. It would take the most accurate of shooting to stop her now—it would take a brain or heart shot. Monte knew the tax that

terrible rush was putting on Everett's nerves.

He heard the crack of Everett's rifle and the bear's grunting roar, signifying that she had been hit. But it did not slow her. Everett frantically levered in another shell and shot again. Monte heard a second grunting roar. This time, he thought there was just the barest hesitation in the bear's charge, then she was coming on as hard as ever.

Everett missed with his third shot. Monte saw the gouge of the bullet against the rocky wall of the canyon. Before Everett could fire the fourth time, the bear was within paw's reach of him. That huge forepaw swept out in a flashing arc, hitting the muzzle and tearing the rifle out of Everett's hands. He staggered under the force of it, then the bear swiped directly at him.

She stood on her hind legs, and her bulk dwarfed the figure of the man. Her paw lashed out, striking at Everett's head, and Monte saw him knocked through the air. He fell heavily, rolled over, and Monte saw him clawing at his holstered pistol. He didn't know how Everett had escaped, but that terrible blow had not crushed his head or broken his neck. He was hurt, but still conscious enough to try for his hand-gun.

The bear rushed toward him, those awful claws plainly visible. Everett was trying to get his feet under him, trying to get his gun out, and he would have time for neither. Without conscious thought, Monte's rifle was snugged to his shoulder. He had only a split-second in which to act, and still so many things flashed through his mind. They were warm, intimate things, the remembrance of so many scenes shared with the hurt man, down in the canyon.

It had to be a heart shot, possibly breaking the bear's back, to stop her. Monte's rifle bucked back against his shoulder. He saw the bear rear to a greater height, then she seemed to wilt all at once, sagging in a great, shapeless mass to the canyon floor. Her outflung paw barely touched Dana Everett's leg.

MONTE had no definite recollection of scrambling down that canyon wall. Somewhere in the descent, he lost his hat, and later he found the knees of his trousers torn, his knees lacerated and bloody, but he had no remembrance of ever falling during that mad descent.

Everett was sitting up when Monte reached him, a dull, stunned look on his face. From the appearance of the right side of his face, he did not seem to be hurt. Then Monte saw the blood.

He asked frantically, "Dana, are you hurt?"

Everett said in a slow, stupid voice, "I —I think so, Monte."

He turned his head and looked full at Monte. Monte's stomach lurched within him. The left side of Everett's neck had been torn open, and the jugular vein was exposed. The blood fell over Everett's shoulder and chest like a thick curtain.

Monte's hands shook as he laid down his rifle. He made the best examination of Everett's wound that he could. He thought, If I can stop the bleeding, he might have a chance. The jugular vein doesn't seem to be harmed, only exposed.

He built a fire, working with frantic haste, then heated the point of his knife blade.

He said hoarsely, "This will give you hell, Dana."

Monte saw Everett's face go a ghastly white as he applied the glowing metal to the torn blood vessels. But the searing stopped most of the dangerous bleeding. Everett made no outcry, and Monte knew an unwilling admiration.

He stretched him out on the canyon floor and said, "Dana, I've got to sew up that hole while the wound's fresh and the flesh can be drawn together. I've got a needle and thread in my pack. We can't wait until we get back to the house, then get a doctor."

Everett said weakly, "Whatever you say, Monte."

Monte went down the canyon at a dead run. His lungs were agonizedly pumping when he reached the animals. He fumbled in one of the packs and found needle and

thread. Then he mounted his horse and, leading Everett's made his way back.

He gritted his teeth and went to work, pulling and sewing the gaping hole together. Everett fainted before the operation was completed. It was a tremendous relief to Monte. He could work at top speed without fear of the pain Everett was suffering. He knew the jaw was broken, but he could do nothing but force it back into place and bind it with a handkerchief. It would have to do until he could get a doctor.

Everett came to just as Monte finished. Monte asked in a shaking voice, "Think you can ride back to the house?"

Everett managed a weak grin. "With you along, I can make it."

Monte helped him into the saddle, holding him steady until the swaying had passed. He mounted his own horse and, holding the reins of Everett's horse, led the way back as rapidly as he dared.

It came to him with a dull shock that was not the way he had planned this at all. But somewhere in that terrible moment, when the bear had reached for Dana, all the hatred had vanished. He had no longer seen a man who had wronged him; he had only remembered a friend. He felt suddenly cleansed inside, a choking lump came up into his throat, and he wanted to cry.

When the canyon broadened, he dropped back beside Dana and extended a steadying arm.

Everett said weakly, "Monte, Thea didn't come back with me. She's not coming back at all."

For just an instant, Monte felt a tightening in his face, then it did not matter. Everett wanted to talk about it, and Monte was willing to listen.

"She picked me because she thought I had more money, Monte. I was just a ticket for her to get out of the West, which she hated. She left me when she found someone with more money. Maybe she couldn't help it, just like I couldn't help it—or you couldn't."

Monte stared at him. He had not been the only one going through his own private hell.

Everett had been there, too.

HE SAID gruffly, "Forget it, Dana."

"I'm going to—if you can."

Monte nodded. The hard cast of his face was breaking up.

Everett said, "I had to borrow heavily to buy the place back. You want a partnership loaded down with debts?"

Monte felt a stinging in his eyes. He said softly, "Couldn't think of anything I'd want more."

Everett said, "I knew that canyon didn't make a circle, Monte. I remembered it. But I sort of figured you had something coming to you." He sighed and said, "It's kind of like a bath, Monte." His eyes pleaded with Monte to understand.

Monte's lips trembled. He said, "We're starting clean, Dana."

His eyes had trouble focusing. Imagine Dana remembering about those canyons! He was learning. Monte thought violently, I'm learning, too. He tried, and he could not remember what Thea looked like.

Next Month—Follow the . . .

TRAIL OF THE DESERT WITCH

in an exciting novel by

JACKSON COLE

●

FEATURING JIM HATFIELD AT HIS FIGHTING BEST!

"Man, are ye drunk or did ye pan some color at our hole?"

GOLD is where you find it

By T. C. McCLARY

Cornish John told nothing but the truth. No one asked him if it was the whole truth. . . .

BUTTE was not yet the richest hill on earth, but in the opinion of the boomers, it was certainly the steepest. Thus it came as a surprise to no one when Padraic Hanrahan charged around into the top of the main drag, skidded in a mud slick, and began his descent of the street in a series of zig-zag tumbles.

The betting was not as to whether he'd survived; hard rock miners survived anything. The betting was simply as to how far he'd proceed before he regained his feet.

At the bottom of the hill, his friend and partner, Cornish John Barlow, stood and waited, offering even money that Padraic would cross the line of the barber pole. Nobody took Cornish John up, for it was considered that the hundred-and-fifty-yard tumble might be some kind of a trick just to hoodwink an unsuspecting honest man out of a dollar.

Padraic crossed the line, still muttering hoarse invective against the hill, caught his feet and lurched in danger of staggering on over the next grade, which was

somewhat longer and somewhat steeper and generally killed or crippled its victims.

Cornish John caught him by the arm and swung him to safety. He stood there shaking some sense back into him with the mild energy of a man who stripped at two-hundred-forty pounds of bone and muscle, every ounce of muscle like steel cable.

"Man, are ye drunk or did ye pan some color at our hole?" he demanded.

"Whoosht!" Padraic gasped, dismissing such trivialities. What would common colors mean when the Emma was already producing ore worth seven dollars, forty-two an ounce raw?

"List ye!" he gasped some more, and none too gently pulled down Cornish John's big, hairy ear. "Grayson and his two claim vultures are in town!" he said into the ear.

Cornish John changed from a creature of mildly human attributes to one of pure vengeance and frothing mayhem. His eyes turned to pools of fire. He pawed the drying mud under his feet. His hands formed stubby, wicked talons.

"Where are they? I'll rip the whole hill down and shovel them in!"

Padraic grabbed his shoulder. "Now that's jist why I wanted to catch ye first, man! It will not get us back the claim he stole down on the Comstock. It will not get us back the money he already made and spent."

Cornish John growled, "'Twill get me something better than gold upon my hands!"

Padraic shook his head. "There ye go ag'in, blowing like an overstoked boiler with its valve choked! It is a sad thing that the Almighty had made the Cornish before he realized he had forgotten to give them sense. It was too late then; the best he could do was give yez voices to make up for yer stubborn stupidity."

Cornish John exploded a fighting breath. "That, from an Irishman who can't use his feet and comes downhill on his head! I'll take a little piece of yer ear on that, Padraic!"

"Leave it," Padraic said without offense, "and come burn off yer temper in a wee drink."

It being Butte, there was not far to go. A saloon was always directly behind them.

"Now," Padraic plotted over their third drink, covering the entire table with the lean of his chest, "I have a plan that is very simple. All ye have to do is pretend ye're smarter than ye are, John."

"That should not be hard for a man like me," Cornish John conceded.

His partner looked at him gravely. "No, it should not. Not at all," he agreed. "For it is clear ye could not slip the other way."

John furrowed his brows. "That has the tone of a dirty crack!" he growled. "Be careful of how ye speak up to yer betters, Padraic."

The Irishman disregarded such belligerent interruptions. "My idea," he said, "is this. When Grayson sees us, he will remember that little claim he robbed us of for eight-hundred dollars and sold for eighty-thousand. He will be looking to see if we have got something like that for him again."

"But that hole of ours ain't worth the shovels we've wore out in it!" John pointed out.

Padraic shook his index finger. It looked like a small club. "Never say it, John; never say it! Gold is where you find it. And yerself, has heard the Tommyknockers talking down there. Or so ye claimed."

"I did that!" John declared stoutly. "Muttering and chuckling, they were, and telling me to hang on! We'd get rich."

"Well, why would they be laughing about poor dirt except for knowing we could get back at Grayson?" Padraic asked. "In a way of speaking, I am thinking maybe the Tommyknockers sent him to us."

CORNISH JOHN was more impressed with that argument than with his partner's intellectual brilliance.

"All ye have to do now," Padraic said, "is act civil, drink Grayson's liquor and tell the truth about our claim."

"The truth!" John erupted. "How in hell can we sell a man a dead hole?"

"There would be one small exaggeration," Padraic said. "Ye'll let him think I have gone to Chicago to buy a pump."

"Yer daft!" the Cornishman growled. "That hole's dry as a bone!"

"Hah!" Padraic grinned. "But it is not going to be. There is going to be forty feet of water brimming, me bhoy!"

Nature had made Cornish John a good miner, but not good at figuring out puzzles. The thing that won him in the end was the opportunity he might have to drink up some of Grayson's ill-gotten money.

There was no love for Grayson lost among the men in the mine fields. Officially, he was a banker's purchasing agent. Unofficially, he was called other things. His job was to cruise the various gold and silver strikes and by claim-jumping, wheedling, conniving, threats, blackmail, or, if necessary, it was claimed, murder, possess himself of valuable properties at the lowest possible figure. His job had made him somewhat cynical, and he had developed an arrogant contempt for the business intelligence of the Cornish Cousin Jacks and the Dublin Irish who had crowded the fields.

Out of experience, his contempt for Barlow and Hanrahan was extra low. For eight-hundred dollars they had thought they were selling him an option. What they actually sold was their whole claim outright, including three-hundred-dollars-worth of tools. There was an additional small point that had always baffled Cornish John in the transaction. Prior to it, he had never been able to use pen and ink to sign his name. But the papers had been signed in pen and ink, and the courts had upheld the deal.

The two men had their drinks and went out to their claim, one of hundreds of holes in the raw hills that had cost endless sweat and toil and were barely panning color. But from the head of their shaft they could look directly next door to the Emma, already operating with giant equipment and paying miners on its fabulous profits, and throwing out on its slag-heap fortunes in ore too low-grade for the Bonanza king to bother with.

It was not just the Emma's luck that was drawing the hordes of gold bugs to Butte. For, although the Emma had hit rich pay dirt, she had not even uncovered the main vein of the Mother Lode. And it was this main vein—so rich and almost pure enough to be freighted without smelting—that was attracting the boomers.

It was such an ore vein—of silver—that Comstick had cut in on and reaped a fortune. And if silver could make the millionaires the Comstock had, think of what gold could do!

Happily, there was a Cornish shift at the Emma and an Irish foreman. Between the two, Cornish John and Padraic were able to enlist the support they needed, including the loan of a water wagon and some cement. Then Padraic squeezed into his Sunday best, packed his carpet-bag, and with cunning secrecy—well-noted in a town like Butte—he exchanged some chunks of ore for money. He then hiked off to the turn of the trail with his valise as if that were a common daily occurrence and had nothing to do with the Cheyenne stage passing there.

Grayson's sharp ears caught the heavy clunk of the ore chunks Padraic had cashed in on and he glanced sharply at his two vulture-eyed companions. The miners used ore up here—raw ore—the way they used dust in other fields! he thought.

In due time, Cornish John drifted into the Bonanza Saloon, with a very smug and self satisfied expression. The expression happened to be real enough, for he was anticipating the free drinks he'd get out of Grayson, even if Padraic's wild plan didn't work. He could see no whit of sense in telling Grayson the truth about their diggings. But Padraic had been absolutely insistent on that point—he was to tell Grayson about everything except the water.

"Well, well!" Grayson hailed him with the false cordiality he'd mastered through long experience. "If it isn't our Cousin Jack from the Comstock!"

Cornish John regarded Grayson and his

vulture-eyed friends with blunt candor, "I thought it was three buzzards come to roost," he growled. "But I see it is vultures. Well, this time, Mr. Grayson, feast your eyes somewhere else."

"Come, come, don't bear an old grudge for no reason!" Grayson told him. "Actually, we didn't know what a good property we were picking up until we went to sell it. Have a drink and let bygones be bygones."

"The drink I'll have," Cornish John growled, "And enjoy every drop!"

HE WAS holding to his act without difficulty. For Grayson's bald lie had made him feel just the right amount of natural truculence to make what he would say sound good. He bristled inwardly as he thought, they'd known what they were buying all right! Somehow, they'd even switched his own assay reports so that he and Padraic didn't fully realize what they had. But these wolverines sure had known!

Grayson signalled to the waiter to bring a bottle of the best. "Still partners with that wild Irisher, Padraic?" he asked.

"A Jonah, if there ever was one!" the Cornishman complained. "Three months I worked our hole and it was dry as bone. His first day on the bottom, he digs open a river! There's no pump in town at any price, and now he will have to go clean . . ."

He broke off according to instructions.

Grayson's eyes were sharp upon him.

Cornish John shrugged his enormous muscular shoulders. "Well, he's gone to get a pump," he finished.

"Kind of an expensive trip," Grayson noted. "He'll have to go clean to Chicago. You struck dirt that's worth it?"

Cornish John snorted with disgust. "We struck nothing but water!" he growled. "A little color, but nothing much. I had an assay made day before the hole filled up."

"Why don't you sell it?" Grayson asked. "There're always men who think they're luckier than you are."

"Well, we'll dig a little first," John told him. "We are only three claims off the Emma. Something might show up."

Grayson toasted and drank, and refilled their glasses. He was quietly casual in the way of a man who doesn't mean to show his interest. He talked of the field in general and poured more drinks. The party grew convivial.

John bethought himself it was his turn to order up and pulled out a chunk of ore. Grayson's eyes took on a hard shine. With a tight effort at control, he rasped, "That stuff yours?"

"This?" John chuckled and rolled it. "I'd like it to be! No, this came off the Emma."

Grayson's hard gaze drilled him. "How do you come to have ore off the Emma?"

Cornish John blinked, thought that over, and said, finally, "Well, a miner owed me a little change."

Grayson exchanged glances with the other two. He noted the time. He said to the leaner man, "Frisco, why don't you go take care of that business at the claims office. Get a map while you're over there."

Frisco nodded and moved out to check on just where Cornish John's claim lay. Grayson had possessed himself of John's piece of ore and was fondling it, fascinated by its weight. It was the first ore from this field he'd handled. And it was fabulous stuff—like handling pure nuggets.

John sat back in his muscles and enjoyed the drinks. He could get as drunk as he wanted. He had nothing to hide, and the more truth Grayson got out of him, the better it would be, for Grayson wouldn't believe him. And clearly, Grayson didn't.

Frisco came back and, after a short time, made excuses and went out with the third man. Grayson signalled a couple of girls to the table and they had an involved mixture of kisses, raw jokes, whisky, beer and steak.

FRISCO came back with the other man as dusk was settling. Night's mountain chill was already dropping on the world outside. But the two vulture-faced men were sweating. They talked to Grayson with their eyes. After a time, Grayson left Frisco in charge and went out with the other man to get a rush assay made.

The assay office hardly needed to make the test. They said the samples Grayson brought were off the same vein as the Emma. Grayson's man told him hoarsely that the top of Cornish John's dump pile was speckled with it.

"Just the top, though," he added. "And the hole's brimming."

Grayson bought a cigar and thought that over. He decided the partners knew they had something, but the dumb Jacks didn't know fully what they had. They had picked out a few pieces of "money ore" that turned up among loose stuff. But they'd hit a vein or an outcropping, or a real bed of the heavy stuff just before their hole filled. And they didn't know it.

He went back to the Bonanza and Cornish John was feeling pretty good. Yes, he had Padraic's power of attorney. But no, they didn't want to sell. Who'd want to buy anyway—there was no real paydirt in the hole! John kept hammering at that. He got a little belligerent about it.

"A dumb Cousin Jack trying to play cute and smart!" Grayson thought.

He tried an offer of two thousand. Cornish John just roared. He tried ten thousand and finally twenty. Tears of laughter trickled down John's rough hewn face.

Grayson shooed the girls away and got down to business. This was a proved-up claim. He couldn't use rough tactics.

He said metallically, "John, I know you've hit paydirt. Maybe you let that hole fill just to hide it. I'll give you forty thousand on a gamble."

John was tempted, but Padraic had said a hundred thousand, and he'd called the shots so far. John said irritably, "There's nothing there. We don't want to sell. Why don't you forget it?"

Grayson ordered another bottle. He'd underestimated these Jacks. They knew damned well, this time, what they had. Padraic had probably tried to sneak off to Chicago for big financing—and with those samples, he'd get it!

Grayson said grimly, dangerously, and finally, "All right, how much?"

John was pretty thoroughly drunk by then. He had trouble naming a hundred thousand. He finally got it out.

Grayson cursed, but he shook him temporarily sober and got the pen and ink, proper papers, and the Notary. John was groggy in the way of a big, muscular man. He was drunk all right, but he had a few things stuck inside his head. He wanted it put in that bill of sale that he didn't think the claim held any real paydirt.

Grayson snapped irritably, "Hell, stick it in, Notary!" After the forms were duly signed and witnessed, Grayson felt better. He said grudgingly, "Well, maybe you had a break coming, John, but you just sold about two million dollars for that hundred thousand!"

Cornish John said with amiable alcoholism, "I'll still buy a drink because I think I just sold a hole full of water!"

Everybody grinned and chuckled and everybody enjoyed their drink.

"He still thinks he was smart!" Grayson marvelled with lofty contempt.

PADRAIC and Cornish Jack hunkered on a hilltop, smoking dollar cigars, and watched the last of the pumping operations as their old mine was drained. They saw Grayson go down, and they saw him come up. They'd have given a good deal to have heard him as he almost broke his foot on that dump pile.

Cornish John shrugged his big shoulders. "I told him that sample came from the Emma! I wonder what he'd have thought if I'd told him there was a cement bottom holding that water in the hole?"

"He'd have thought ye were a dumb Cousin Jack trying to pull his leg," Padraic said. "Now if I'd shown me intelligent Irish face, we'd have never put the deal over for he'd have figured there was a brain somewhere behind this."

John's mane hackled like a cockatoo's plume. "Where would ye find room for a brain with all the bone in your head? How would we have gotten the water out of there if he hadn't bought it?"

Padraic gave him a scathing look. The answer was obvious, considering their previous finances. They'd have gotten it out with a bucket. ● ● ●

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY

A Quiz Corral in Which a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—What is the highest pass through which any regular U.S. Highway crosses the Rocky Mountains?—M.R.S. (S.C.).

A.—Loveland Pass on U.S. 6 in Colorado, elevation 11,992 feet.

Q.—Where was the so called Outlaw Trail in the old west, and just what was it?—J.W.W. (Calif.).

A.—The famous old Outlaw Trail was a pretty well defined route followed by members of Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch and other outlaws and horsethieves in disposing of stolen horses or simply in hiding out from the law. It reached from the Canadian Border in Montana to Mexico, with handy hideouts on the way at such places as Hole-In-the-Wall, Wyoming, Brown's Hole at the corner of Utah, Wyoming and Colorado, Robbers' Roost in Utah, Tuba City, Arizona, and Alma, New Mexico.

Q.—I have heard there is a monument to Popeye the Sailor somewhere out west. If so, where is it?—T.H. (Wis.).

A.—At Crystal City in southwest Texas, a spinach growing community on the Nueces River.

Q.—What is the difference between a "road brand" and just an ordinary brand?—R.D.L. (Wash.).

A.—An ordinary registered brand is the burned-on mark with which any cattle owner marks his cattle. In the days of trail driving, there was a law in Texas providing that all cattle to be driven beyond the northern limits of the state must be branded by the driver "with a large and plain mark, composed of any mark or device he may choose, which mark shall be branded on the left side of all such stock behind the shoulder." The purpose of this brand was to make it easy for cowboys to identify cattle belonging to any certain herd which might be made up of cattle originally owned by several different men and wearing a variety of brands. Since the passing of trail driving, road brands are no longer used.

Q.—Are there any natural geysers in the west besides those in Yellowstone Park?—G.B. (Ind.).

A.—I am sure there are, but the only other spouters I myself know about (not counting Texans) are a couple in eastern Utah near Greenriver. One of these spouts about 15 feet high, the other about 100 feet and is said to be the only really cold water geyser in the world.

Q.—Who were Johnny, Lonny and Harvey Logan?—Butch (Mich.).

A.—These brothers, born in Kentucky and raised in Missouri, went west and became rustlers in the Red Sash Gang led by Nate Champion in Wyoming in the late 1880's and early 1890's. The Logans were part Cherokee Indian and none of the three died a natural death, but another brother, Henry, was a respected ranchman.

Q.—I have heard that there is a big statue of a Range Rider somewhere in the west, for which the model was Wm. S. (Bill) Hart, cowboy star of the silent movies. If so, where is it?—H.R.G. (La.).

A.—At the old cowtown, now a modern city of 32,000, Billings, Montana.

—*S. Omar Barker*

HANG 'EM AND WEEP

a novelet by

G. DAVISSON LOUGH

Blue Sawyer knew the man on his trail meant to kill him, but when the chance came to get rid of the man for good, Blue wasn't sure he wanted it that way

I

WEST of El Paso toward the Gila at Soldier's Farewell, fear put a hand on his throat and the courage went out of him, left him a cold dry shuck, rattling. He got his horse from the livery stable and rode out into the night without stopping to pay his bill, rode like a maniac, his spurs dripping blood.

His horse went down outside of Tucson and he bought another, the fear's hand still on his throat, and rode on. He spent four horses between Tucson and Fire-

"Keep your dirty rope off him!" he slashed out, his dark eyes blazing. "Untie him, and then clear out. . . ."

baugh's Ferry; then, at last, sanctuary—San Francisco.

It was a bright golden day in early September when he rode in from the ferry. There was a sharp bite and glitter in the breeze along the bay. From the first he'd had the California gold fields in mind, a place so crowded and confused that even he might be lost, lost to the sharp senses of that tall, wild figure of six-feet-two, with cold eyes and a slit of a mouth like the flash of sun on a knife-blade.

The fear was with him still, but it no longer strangled. It dogged. An advertisement in the *Alta California* told him a man by the name of Steve Burgurd, an agent-banker, desired the services of an "honest, courageous, gun-handy gentleman." So he called on Steve Burgurd on the day following his arrival in 'Frisco.

He disliked and mistrusted Burgurd on sight. Wearing the dress of a rich snob with the air of a tyrant, Burgurd could be a fool or a sage. Whichever he was it was evident by the hot glint in his wide-apart pale eyes, and the sudden swell of his thick neck when he spoke, that he was hasty, ruthless, dangerous.

They met in Mongomery Street, at the straggling upper end, and shook hands there in the sunshine. "What's your name?" Burgurd asked.

The fear almost caused him to lie. But honesty had been a subconscious impulse with him for too long, so he said, "Blue Jarvis. Blue isn't a nickname. My mother's maiden name was Blue. The family is an old one in Kentucky."

"That gun you carry," Burgurd said, looking at the Whitneyville-Walker .44 that nestled solidly in the open-topped holster that swung low on Jarvis's right leg. "Shoot it, can you?"

"Somewhat," Jarvis replied.

BURGURD told him, "I need a dust buyer. A man with plenty of guts and gun-savvy to ride a route of mine through the diggings on the Mukelemnes. He'll pick up dust, give out receipts, bring the dust here for safekeeping. I get a commission from the miners for guaranteeing that their dust will be here in my office when they want it. You get a salary, and the danger's all yours."

"How many other buyers you employ?" Jarvis asked.

"Eight," Burgurd replied. "It's getting to where I've got Wells Fargo worried." He snickered. "I had nine men until day before yesterday when the man on the Mukelemnes was drygulched." He paused. contemplated Jarvis with a slit-eyed look, said, "You sure you want the job?"

For answer Jarvis picked up a chip of wood from the street. "See here, friend," he said, spreading his right hand above the haft of the Whitneyville-Walker .44, and placing the chip on the back of it with his left, "is a trick I know."

Burgurd nodded, his pale eyes indifferent. The pale eyes said, "Here is a trick and here is a fool doing it.

"When I jump my hand to draw," Jarvis went on, his tone slow, "the chip will fall. Watch now. I'll draw and I'll sink a bullet through the thumb-sized stem of that sapling yonder before the chip strikes the dirt. Watch!"

And he did it, with a smoothness and an ease that brought a gasp from Burgurd.

"Jarvis," Burgurd said, "that was the finest piece of gunwork I ever witnessed."

Jarvis remembered the fear when Burgurd said that. The wild six-feet-two figure with cold, steady eyes and a slit of a mouth could shoot better than that. He was faster than that, even; and he was going to kill Jarvis some day. Jarvis felt certain of it.

And why? Why?

He answered the "why" silently, in his mind, as he looked out at big, dandy Steve Burgurd, who still was a bit stupefied from the flashy gunplay he had seen, and the answer brought the fear closer, put its hand on his throat again.

The answer said, I'll tell you why. It's because you saw too much in the pert wiggle of a hussy's hips when she walked by you that night at Soldier's Farewell beyond the Gila. You followed the hussy. Remember? Remember, Blue?

He remembered. There in a black hole his memory made he saw again the strained, inquiring face of the tall man, saw the moonlight glance off something that looked like a gun in the tall man's hand, heard the thin, crazy giggling of the hussy. The tall man was coming for him through the darkness and moon glow. He sprang up to an elbow, sweating, staring.

Locked limb to limb, mouth to mouth, his heart pounding on her heart, the sweet perfume of her in his brain, spicing his

passion—and here came the tall man with a brightness by his right hand, calling the hussy's name.

"Teressa! Teressa, are you in bed so early?"

He clawed his gunbelt and holster from the floor beneath the bed, drew his gun, leveled it across the pale, round ridge of her shoulder and fired.

Afterward he and the hussy searched for the gun he was certain he'd seen in the tall man's hand. They didn't find it. He left the hussy, moaning sorrowfully beside the corpse of this one of her lovers who would love her no more.

The next day he learned the name of the man he had killed. Roy Wilmerdine.

"Roy—not Jeff," he mumbled to himself, sitting at a table at the deep end of the bar in the saloon at Soldier's Farewell.

Jeff was Roy's brother. Jeff was the wild six-feet-two figure with cold, steady eyes and a slit of a mouth like the crease between the lips of a sprung steel-trap, and a right hand as fast as a darting ray of sunlight, and a shooting eye as true as a stone-mason's line pointing a plumb-bob.

THE hussy had named him to Jeff as Roy's killer. He learned that, also, while sitting there sipping beer. A Texas strain out of Tennessee, the Wilmerdines—vindictive, long on memory where a kinsman's blood was let.

So Blue Jarvis had ridden hard from Soldier's Farewell, raking his spurs, bemoaning his luck, cursing the hussy. Now he went over it all again with his feelings while he waited Burgurd's decision. The fear had its hand on his throat again. He wondered if he looked frightened.

Finally Burgurd nodded. "You want the job, it's yours, Jarvis," he said. "You seem to have the guts and gun savvy. I hope for your sake you're honest."

"I'll make you a good hand," Jarvis replied.

And he would, he knew. He feared nothing on earth except Jeff Wilmerdine; and that was because he knew Wilmerdine was a better man with a gun.

For nine exciting, dangerous years in Texas Jeff Wilmerdine had been sheriff, and he had been his deputy. He had come to Wilmerdine a greenhorn, a crazy brat with an idea that he'd ride out on the owl-hoot soon. He had left Wilmerdine a seasoned adult with a love for the law, a man who had been shown the value of honesty, the importance of loyalty.

Wilmerdine was an iron-handed disciplinarian, always intolerant of excuses, but a man of great courage, and the greatest fighter with hands or weapons that Jarvis had ever known.

"I'll make you a good hand, Burgurd," he repeated after they shook hands, about to part.

"I believe you will," Burgurd said.

So Jarvis rode the trails up and down the Mukelemnes River, collecting dust for Burgurd. He liked the work. He did well; better than he'd expected. He kept a room in San Francisco, spent the weekends there. His good nature and direct, honest manner soon made him many friends, and though he never came to care for, or to trust, Steve Burgurd, he did come to know a measure of security in his surroundings. And almost the fear was forgotten.

Then he saw the hussy again.

In a crowd awaiting the arrival of the night stage from Carson City, he saw her—fiery Teressa of the soft, dark hair and bright, dark eyes, and the titillating smile that came with a tossing of the head and an arching of the slender neck. Hoping to escape, not sure that she saw him, he fought his way from the crowd and ran into a dark alley. But she was there, suddenly clinging to him.

"Blue, please don't run away from Teressa!"

He stood still, panting from the struggle with the crowd, and let her come in against him with her body. She kissed him on the mouth and the throb of her was a burning caress, and suddenly a sickness rose overpowering in him. He saw with startling clarity the picture of a frightened man riding wildly from Sol-

dier's Farewell, muttering curses in the night. And behind the picture, deeper in him, pulsed a haunting refrain, a crazy fugue—the lonely, awful sounds of the hunter and the hunted.

Her mouth held on his in hurting effort, driving the dryness of her lips and the wetness of her tongue against his teeth.

"Come with Teressa," she whispered. "This time there will be no interruption."

He saw the trap as plainly as if he had set it himself—the dark room, the shadow looming up, the slow voice of Jeff Wilmerdine, when it was too late.

He tried to break away and came from the alley with her clutching his arm—and there was Steve Burgurd and one of his dust buyers, a Buck Alberts, with Alberts pointing at Teressa and Burgurd grabbing her.

"That's the girl!" Alberts cried. "That's the flip that was with them when they killed Shattuck."

Teressa was sobbing in Burgurd's grip. Burgurd looked across her head at Jarvis. "You know her, Blue?" he asked.

"No," Jarvis said.

IT WAS his first lie since Jeff Wilmerdine had pinned the deputy badge on his shirt more than nine years ago. The fear, with a hand on his throat, had choked it from him. He expected Teressa to throw it back in his teeth, but she only shook her head angrily and sobbed.

"Where's your friend?" Burgurd asked her. "The tall, sandy-haired one who shot the man in the back on the Toualimes trail today?"

She didn't reply, so he shook her, his big hands bruising her shoulders, and shouted at her.

"Where is he, girl? Where is he?"

She didn't tell him. She was angry. She tossed her head and stamped her feet. She didn't tell him.

"We'll get it out of her," Burgurd said, stepping into the darkness of the alley, jerking her after him. "She knows where he is, all right. Come along with us, Jarvis. It's nice luck running into you just when you're needed."

Jarvis followed, a step behind the girl. Alberts walked at his side.

In a dugout at the end of the alley, a place from where her cries, if she made any, would not be heard, Burgurd handed Teressa over to Jarvis, then pulled off his belt.

"Now, girl," he said through clenched teeth, slapping his leg with his belt—a wide, tough thong, "you say where your friend is, or I'll cut the clothes off you. You hear?"

Jarvis wasn't sure what he would do if Burgurd struck her. He also knew he wouldn't stand by and see her beaten. It was a relief when she spoke up, naming the place the sandy-haired man was hiding.

"And his name—say his name for us, miss," Burgurd commanded her.

"His name is Jeff Wilmerdine," she said. "But he didn't kill anybody. Coming here today we found a man lying beside the trail, shot in the back and dying. He said his name was Shattuck, that he had been shot and robbed of two pokes of gold dust. He said he had had four pokes and the robber got only two of them. He pointed out a spot in some weeds off the trail where he had thrown the other two pokes before the robber came up, He asked us to get them and bring them to a—a Steve Burgurd at San Francisco. That's what Jeff and I were doing when we stopped at that place to eat, and that man there saw the pokes."

She pointed a finger at Buck Alberts as she finished speaking. Alberts nodded.

"I recognized them pokes," he said, "as belonging to miners on Shattuck's route. I knew you'd stole them. When the youngish feller split off from you two at Beeghley's Tavern, I figured he had two of the pokes from Shattuck's *mochilla* and the long-geared sandy-haired feller had the other two. And by hell, I was right!"

"The young man," Teressa said quickly, glaring contemptuously at Alberts, "joined us later, after Mr. Shuttuck died. He was with us for perhaps a mile before we reached the tavern."

Burgurd gave Teressa an ugly grin.

"You're making up stuff," he said. He spoke to Jarvis then. "There were three of them, Blue. The girl here, a stringy, yellow-haired gent who calls himself Willoson, and a tall, sandy-haired one. They drygulched Shattuck on the Toualimes and stole four pokes of dust. Buck was at Beeghley's when they came in there afterwards, saw them handling Shattuck's pokes and lit out for town to tell me. We got Willoson awhile ago, took him over to Jim Cuxley's cabin. He confessed to drygulching Hank, claims he did it under duress—this tall gent, Wilmerdine, supplying the duress."

He put on his belt, threading it quickly through the loops in his trousers, looked at Teressa, his pale eyes burning strangely.

"Now we're going after the sandy-haired one," he said.

"He might not be so easy," Jarvis said, and the fear was at him again. "He might cause some trouble."

"Trouble, Blue?" Burgurd laughed, deriding such an idea. "With you and your fast gun along?" He let the laugh soften to a thick chuckle.

Hearing that chuckle, Jarvis knew that Burgurd loved this sort of thing. Burgurd, he thought, was like a baron of old setting out with his men and his dogs on the human chase. He winced as Burgurd grabbed Teressa's shoulder, his big fingers thumping the flesh.

"We're taking you along, girlie," Burgurd told her. "If you try any tricks I'll kill you, choke you till your little tongue pops out."

II

THEY went out of the dugout and down the alley, Burgurd in the lead, carrying the lantern he'd blown out before coming into the open, Alberts holding onto the girl, Jarvis bringing up the rear. Every step that Jarvis took seemed an impulse urging him to get his horse and ride, ride anywhere just so it was far away. Portland, he thought, might do. Jeff Wilmerdine might not look for him there.

He tried to make himself believe that Wilmerdine was finished, would be taken within the hour. But it wouldn't go. The three of them would never take Jeff Wilmerdine. Wilmerdine would come roaring out at them, gun blazing, his wrath a white flame above his great blond mustache. He would gun them down.

Burgurd led them from the alley into a narrow street, lined with tents, shacks, and sleeping miners. At the end of the street he stopped, pointed off in the star-hazed darkness, and said:

"The cabin she mentioned is over there, Blue. If he's in it, we'll take him."

He turned to Alberts. "You stay here and keep a hand on the girl, Buck, until we get back. She gets away I'll break your neck."

A well-worn horse trail led away from the street. Burgurd stepped out along it, Jarvis followed. A few seconds later he realized he was breathing too fast, tried to check it.

Burgurd must have noticed it, because he said, "What's eating you, Blue?"

"I'm all right," Jarvis told him, but his voice was too quick.

He had his gun in his hand, but the feel of it gave no strength to his courage. He wanted to tell Burgurd what kind of man they were going against, but was afraid if he began talking about Wilmerdine the rest of it would come out and Burgurd would see him as a murderer. Blue Jarvis, a murderer. It galled him to think of it.

Burgurd stopped suddenly, whispering, "See the big hump there—straight on ahead—blacker than the hillock behind it?"

"Yes," Jarvis said.

"That's the cabin." Burgurd chuckled softly, the sound of it an obscenity. "We'll go right up to the door, like we're making a social call. I'll knock, say who I am. He'll remember my name from his talk with Hank Shattuck, and he'll open the door. When he does you cover him and I'll tie his hands. Then we'll march him over to Jim Cuxley's cabin. Cuxley's waiting for us there with the other one."

Jarvis replied in a whisper. "When do we turn them over to the law?"

"Law?" The word was a derisive curdle in Burgurd's throat. "Law? What law? That sot of a sheriff in town? Somebody'd slip him a poke of dust and he'd turn them loose in a couple of days." He chuckled again. The sound was as effective as an oath; more so. "We'll be the law for Hank Shattuck's murderers tonight, Blue. We're going to string them up."

Jarvis said nothing. What Burgurd said was of no consequence until Wilmerdine was overcome. And, of course, Wilmerdine would not permit himself to be overcome. He might die tonight, but it wouldn't be with his neck in a noose. It would be with a gun in his hand, roaring and spouting. And others would die with him.

"Come along," the big man said. "Keep a little to my left. Yes, like that. Don't shoot him down unless you have to. I want to see him hang."

BURGURD rapped gently on the cabin door. The response was immediate.

"Who is it?"

"Steve Burgurd," Burgurd said evenly. "I came to thank you for making death a little easier for one of my messengers today. The man's name was Shattuck."

"You're Burgurd, eh?" the solemn baritone voice from beyond the door said. "I got a couple pokes of dust for you here. Your man, Shattuck, saved them from his drygulcher by—"

"I know," Burgurd interrupted. "Your lady friend told me all about it."

"Is that right?" Wilmerdine asked, his voice edged with surprise. The door opened and he stood before them, tall and gaunt in the starshine. "Talking with Teressa, was you?" Both of Wilmerdine's hands were in front of him, holding the pokes of dust.

"Yes," Burgurd said, and the starlight gleamed softly along the barrel of his gun. "Don't move, Wilmerdine. Steady, man. My gun is trained on your belly, and so's the gun of my partner, here. My partner's name is Blue Jarvis which, if you don't know, means sudden death in a ruckus. Put up your hands, man. Up slowly. I'll take the dust."

At mention of his name, Jarvis drew back a step, expecting Wilmerdine to roar with laughter or an oath and strike at them with the gun on his thigh. What he did stunned Jarvis. He slowly lifted his hands, slowly said, in his fine mellow voice:

"I intended looking you up in the morning, to give you the dust. As I didn't come straight to you from Shattuck, I reckon you think I aimed to keep it."

Burgurd slapped Wilmerdine's face with his soft obscene chuckle. The sound of it accused, said Thief! He snatched Wilmerdine's gun away, saying to Jarvis:

"Keep him covered, Blue, while I tie his hands."

To Jarvis's utter amazement he drew a length of pigging string from a pocket and went in and did it. So the fear was trapped, the fear was tied, the fear was helpless. For the first time since that night at Soldier's Farewell, Blue Jarvis drew a free breath.

Wilmerdine would likely tell the story of that night, name him the killer of an unarmed man. But who would believe a man who had shot another man in the back to rob him?

Only Jeff hadn't done that, hadn't killed Shattuck. Of course, he hadn't. Blue had worked beside Wilmerdine too long to believe such a thing. There was some mistake. Willoson was lying, hoping to scatter the blame.

Jarvis knew Wilmerdine had recognized him, even before Burgurd had called out his name, and wondered why he was being ignored.

"Step along there," Burgurd said, prodding Wilmerdine with his gun.

The tall sheriff obeyed without protest. It was incredible to Jarvis—the tall, mean whip of a man permitting Burgurd to drive him like a dumb sheep.

Alberts and the girl were waiting where they'd left them. The girl came toward them.

"You, Burgurd," she said, her voice an

angry sob, "your man here tried to make a deal with me. It's the truth, s' help me! He said he'd let me go if—if I would."

"It's a lie!" Alberts said, casting Burgurd a sheepish look.

Burgurd didn't speak, just gazed at Alberts with disgust as Teressa went on protesting. His lip curled when Teressa went into details. It made Jarvis a little sick.

Finally Wilmerdine said, "Hush, Teressa."

She crouched toward him, saw that his hands were tied and turned to Jarvis, her hands open toward him. "Please don't turn us over to the sheriff!" she said.

Burgurd chuckled thickly.

Alberts, nervous, said, "It's the truth, boss, she lied. I got a wife and children."

Burgurd picked up the lantern, turned his back on Alberts, spoke to Jarvis. "We're going to Jim Cuxley's cabin. It's just a little ways. We need you along, Blue."

He stepped behind Wilmerdine, told him to walk straight ahead.

III

JIM CUXLEY, a bear of a man with a bull neck, bird eyes, and a chin like a shovel, was happy to see them.

"Got the skunk, I see, Boss," he said to Burgurd. He grinned at Jarvis. "Having fun, eh, Blue!" He laughed and rubbed his ham-like hands together.

They all went inside the cabin. Jarvis, last to enter, closed the door and put his back against it. Willoson sat on a chair in the center of the room, his hands tied behind him. He was young, in his twenties, and thin, with a long, ugly face, a slip of a mouth that wore a constant simper, and pale, protruding eyes. Jarvis knew the type and felt sorry for him. Weakness and indecision had put him into this, not intention with a plan. If he had murdered Hank Shattuck, he probably had done it on impulse.

Burgurd stood over him, hands on hips, feet far apart. He may have been burning with righteous indignation; he may have been simply amused.

"You shot Hank Shattuck in the back," he said. "Right, Willoson?" Not giving Willoson time to reply he waved a hand at Jeff Wilmerdine. "This the man who put you up to it, forced you to do it?"

Willoson nodded, avoiding Jeff Wilmerdine's calm gaze that was turned upon him. Jarvis caught a stray look that glimmered in Willoson's eyes for a moment, crafty, hopeful, and guessed the man was thinking, if I bring him in with me it'll maybe go easier for me.

Willoson began mumbling, looking up into Burgurd's face like a begging dog. "I ain't been around here long," he said. "I got a bad sickness. I came here from Kansas for my health, hoping I could pick up a little gold."

"You drygulch a man, then you pick up some?" Burgurd said.

Willoson nodded, seeming confused. He risked a glance at Wilmerdine, drew a long, twisting breath. "I wouldn't have done it. Honest! Only I was afraid not to. He—Mr. Wilmerdine said he'd cut my throat if I didn't."

"You lie," said Jeff Wilmerdine calmly.

Burgurd whirled on Wilmerdine, eyes flashing angrily, mouth a cruel twist. "Why didn't you bring the dust straight to me, if you came by it like you said?" he asked.

"I had more urgent business to attend to first," Wilmerdine said, his voice slow, almost droning. He turned his big, shaggy head when he finished speaking and gave Jarvis a long, straight look.

Burgurd let go his slimy chuckle. "You heard what Highpockets just said, Blue?" he said. "Can you beat it the things some of these crooks say!"

"Give me a little time," Wilmerdine continued gently, "and I'm sure I can satisfy you that I'm not one to murder and rob. For nine years, and up to a year ago when I resigned, I held the office of sheriff back in Texas. I can write a letter and have my credentials mailed to me here—in jail. If you'll give me a little time."

He didn't look at Jarvis again, but

Jarvis knew he was waiting for him to do the decent thing—speak out, tell Burgurd he would vouch for him. He would have done it, too, only the fear wouldn't let him. To save Wilmerdine's life meant losing his own. The favor was something Wilmerdine would see as duty. It would not change his feelings about Jarvis. This, Jarvis well knew.

Burgurd spoke in a low tone to Cuxley, who went into another room and came back with a rope. The rope was fixed with a hangman's noose.

"We'll take Willoson first," Burgurd said, his eyes glowing, his jaw muscles flickering.

Alberts jerked Willoson onto his feet, then had to hold him up, Willoson's face was the color of skimmed milk, his eyes were rolling this way and that. "I—" he began, and strangled, then gagged as he tried to go on. Finally he gave it up.

Wilmerdine looked at him with pity and disgust. "If you didn't kill that man say so," he said, his baritone voice rolling. "You won't get any help if you confess to a lie. Did you kill him?"

"Yes—yes," Willoson said. As an afterthought, he muttered, "You know I did. You made me do it."

"You lie," Wilmerdine said.

BLUE JARVIS saw his great arms tighten at the biceps and knew he was testing his wrist cords.

Wilmerdine had just told Willoson he wouldn't get any help if he confessed to a lie, and Jarvis wondered from whom he would get help if he did otherwise. From Wilmerdine? What did the big Texan have in mind?

The answer seemed ready made. It popped right up for Jarvis. You, it said. He has you in his mind. Jarvis knew it was a right answer. Wilmerdine expected him to interfere. As he had been for nine years in Texas, so it was now—Wilmerdine, ex-sheriff, was waiting for Jarvis ex-deputy, to do what was proper and according to law. The law, even California law, didn't sanction lynching, and this was a lynching.

Burgurd took the rope from Cuxley, laid the noose over Willoson's head, drew it close around his neck.

"Come on, let's get the hell out of here." he said, shoving Willoson toward the door. He glanced at Jarvis. "Keep an eye on Highpockets, Blue. He's getting ideas."

Jarvis drew his gun, stepped behind Wilmerdine, thinking, this gets rid of him. This saves my life. I don't see as I have any complaint coming, the way things have panned out.

As Wilmerdine came into the doorway, he turned his head back a little, saying, when no one save Jarvis could see or hear, "What makes a coward, Blue? Why didn't you face Roy man to man? Why did you shoot him down when he was unarmed? What makes a coward?"

"Every man's a coward," Jarvis replied. "Fear goes under a great many different names. I wasn't afraid of Roy, Jeff. I'm afraid of you."

"When you thought you could escape me easily, or now?" Wilmerdine asked. "Are you afraid of me now?"

They came into the open. The others, Burgurd and Willoson in the lead, were moving off toward an oak tree beside the trail. Jarvis, ignoring Wilmerdine's question, said:

"Jeff, if I break up this party, free you, will you let me alone?"

"No," Wilmerdine said.

"I didn't think you would," Jarvis replied. "What do you want, Jeff?"

"Your life for Roy's," Wilmerdine said quietly. "I'm not going to treat you as you did Roy, though. I'm going to give you an even break. If you like, you may choose the way I'll kill you—knives, guns, or hands."

They came up with the others beneath the tree. Teressa, standing beside Alberts, was crying softly. The sound of it hinted at perpetuity, as though it might never stop. Jarvis missed Cuxley, then saw him coming from the direction of the cabin, leading a horse.

Cuxley led the horse to a spot under the tree that was directly below a straight, low-growing limb. Watching it, Jarvis de-

cided these men had hanged others here. They knew exactly what they were about. There were no wasted movements, no confusion.

Burgurd and Cuxley had to lift Willoson onto the horse, then Burgurd had to hold him there. He slumped and rolled like a man in a drunken stupor, moaning, saliva bubbling on his lips.

Cuxley tossed the rope over the low-growing limb, caught its end as it came down, then paused, blinking up in the lantern light.

"The noose all right, boss?" he asked in a slow, flat voice.

Burgurd, sweat glistening on his face, said that it was.

Cuxley made the rope fast to a big root that protruded in a handy loop from the earth, then stood back.

"Hey! Can't ya read?"

Alberts, standing beside the girl on Jarvis's right hand, hunched forward a little, his eyes on Willoson in snakelike fascination.

Teressa, aware of the growing silence and the meaning of the moment, glanced over at Wilmerdine, then dropped her head in a gesture of hopelessness and began sobbing. The sobbing and Willoson's thick, irregular breathing were the only sounds until Burgurd snatched off his hat and slashed it down hard across the horse's croup.

The horse snorted, jumped as far as it could straight ahead.

IT WAS over in a few moments, and Burgurd, walking toward Wilmerdine and Jarvis, was saying, "It makes me feel clean to hang a damned drygulcher."

No one else spoke. Alberts cut down Willoson's body, moved it out of the way. Curley fixed the rope for Wilmerdine.

Burgurd halted in front of the tall Texan, a cruel smile twitching the corners of his mouth.

"If you'll confess," he said, "I'll hang you as I did Willoson. If you don't I'll have Cuxley roll out a barrel. You know the difference in a horse and a barrel at a hanging?"

Wilmerdine nodded. "With the horse," he said, speaking almost gently, as though he felt sorry for Burgurd, "there's usually a snap that breaks the neck. With the barrel a man always strangles to death."

Burgurd let slip his slimy chuckle. "It's a thing you'd know," he mocked, "you being an ex-sheriff. Which'll it be, ex-Sheriff?"

"I won't confess to a crime I didn't commit," Wilmerdine calmly replied.

Burgurd cupped a hand behind an ear, leaned forward a little like a man hard of hearing. "Did I hear it right?" he said, a gloating in his face that made Jarvis swallow and drop his eyes. "You say you want the barrel? You say you want to squirm and kick and choke and die slow?"

There was silence then. Jarvis, still looking at the ground, remembered how confident Wilmerdine had seemed only minutes ago, how his speech had taken the future for granted. Now, he wondered, how did he feel? Now facing Steve Burgurd and a hangrope, now that the rub was here?

Jarvis lifted his head, looked directly into Wilmerdine's face, hoping to see fear there, feeling if he did he might forget his own fear of Wilmerdine long enough to break this thing up. If only there would show a small blot of weakness in the man he might find courage to set him free, fight him later.

His hopes shriveled at the look in Wilmerdine's face. The big Texan faced Burgurd as a lion, during a tolerant moment,

might face a rat that had, somehow, managed to trap it. In that face there was no shadow, no pallor, no mark of fear. Only courage, controlled and waiting. And strangely it was the courage that drew Jarvis's feeling.

IV

AFTERWARDS, when he was facing Wilmerdine's gun, he wondered about it, wondered if at that moment, when the courage of the tall man drew him so, he could have acted differently if he had tried.

He stepped out, dropping his right hand, hooking it loosely as it came to a stop beneath the big handles of the Whitneyville-Walker .44. He threw his head around, seeing Teressa, who was still weeping—Buck Alberts, Jim Cuxley, then settled his eyes on Steve Burgurd's flushed face.

"Keep your dirty rope off him!" he slashed out at Burgurd, his long lips white and twitching, his dark eyes blazing. "Untie him, then clear out! You hear me?"

"Why—why, Blue!" Burgurd backed away looking at him with a puzzle in his eyes that was rapidly becoming something else. "Who gave you the right to—"

"Untie him!" Jarvis repeated.

From over by the tree Jim Cuxley said, "What'n hell is this?"

"The party's over," Jarvis told him.

"Like hell it is!" Cuxley dipped his hand.

Jarvis's right hand twitched, Cuxley's draw was coming up when he shot him. Burgurd's draw was leveling when he angled back. He couldn't tell what Alberts was doing. He shot Burgurd in the face in time, then whirled on Alberts, who screamed for mercy.

ALBERTS could have killed him while he was working with Cuxley and Burgurd, but the man hadn't moved except to throw up his hands.

"I got a wife and children!" Alberts said, his voice trembling with relief.

"See if Cuxley's dead," Jarvis told him. He untied Teressa's hands first, then did the same for Wilmerdine.

"Jim's dead all right," Alberts told him.

"I'm going for the sheriff," Jarvis said, looking across at Alberts. "You stay here till he comes."

"Sure — sure thing, Blue," Alberts croaked.

Jarvis turned around and walked down to the cabin. He found the four bags of dust and Wilmerdine's gun, came outside with them. Wilmerdine and Teressa were waiting for him. He handed over the gun.

"Thanks," Wilmerdine said. "We'll go along to my place now."

"One of us will have to take word to the sheriff," Jarvis said.

"All right, one of us will."

"Does it have to be now—tonight?" Jarvis asked. "Can't it wait? I'll not run from you again."

"It's long overdue," Wilmerdine said. "I want it tonight."

Wilmerdine carried a lantern he'd picked up at the tree, struck out with it down the path. Teressa, silent now, moved like a ghost beside him.

Jarvis followed, thinking, I can kill him now. I can! Why don't I?

Teressa began crying when they reached Wilmerdine's cabin, and the Texan told her to go inside and wait there until one of them came back. She started to protest, mumbling something about Roy and that night at Soldier's Farewell, but the sobs choked back what she wanted to say. At last Wilmerdine pushed her inside the cabin and closed the door.

He motioned to Jarvis and started toward the horse trail, still carrying the lantern.

"This way, Blue," he said. "There's a level spot back here a ways with a stump in the middle of it that'll make a good place to put the lantern."

"There's one thing, Jeff," Jarvis said, following close at his heels.

"What's that now?"

"I didn't know it was Roy. That night a little moon glow fuzzed in through the curtains, but it was no good. I saw a man coming for me. I thought I saw a gun in his hand. So I did what any man would've

done, Jeff."

"Not any man," Wilmerdine quickly disagreed. "I'd have made sure about a gun being in his hand."

"I thought it was there," Jarvis said. "The little light that was in the room glittered on something where his right hand might have been. It looked like a gun."

"It wasn't, though, or it would have been found later."

"I guess it would," Jarvis said.

"So it wasn't a gun," Wilmerdine went on. "He broke up your party and it made you mad and you shot him down. You say you thought he had a gun. I'll accept that, but it isn't good enough."

"Did you go to the room in daylight and look for the gun?" Jarvis asked.

"Yes," Wilmerdine replied quickly. "If I had found one do you think I would be here now? Do you think, Blue, I would want this if Roy had come for you with a gun in his hand? I always liked you, Blue, and after tonight—"

They came to a little clearing in the brush and Wilmerdine became quiet, stepping out into it. Jarvis started to follow, but stopped when the Texan said:

"You stay there. I'll cross to the other side of the stump. That way the light won't be in anybody's eyes."

JARVIS, surprised at his calmness, wondering about no longer being afraid, stood still, watching. Wilmerdine paused and put the lantern down on the stump, then walked on to the other edge of the clearing and turned around.

"What distance do you say, from me to you?" Wilmerdine asked.

"About forty feet," Jarvis replied.

"You're a straight shot, Blue. At this distance you'll have more of a chance. I know—I'm faster on the snag than you, but I can't shoot any straighter."

"I'm satisfied, Jeff. I'm a dead man already, but I'll do my best."

Wilmerdine glanced at the lantern, then up at the star-bright sky. "We ought to have some signal to act by," he said, looking around the clearing. "I know. I'll place a match in the cap-vent of the lantern. That way it might take a minute or so for the match to ignite. When it flares, we go for our guns. How's that, Blue?"

"It suits me," Jarvis said. His voice seemed heavy and there was an effort from it like lifting a great weight when he spoke.

He was a fool. He should have killed Wilmerdine coming out here. Wilmerdine was also a fool. Couldn't the man see that if he was one to shoot down an unarmed man, then he would not have let him live until now, until they were facing each other in contest?

He sighed softly, recalling snatches of gunfights in which he'd seen Wilmerdine work. The man was a flash, deadly in his accuracy. The gun, a Griswold-Greer .36, in the roomy hand-tooled Mexican holster, became a part of his hand in the draw, a most sensitive part, leaping up, finding range and target as with a magic eye of its own. He shook his head, knowing beyond hope that he was no match for Jeff Wilmerdine.

The Texan fixed the match, studied his work a moment. Then, seeming satisfied, he turned and went back to his place.

For Jarvis the seconds grew, took on personalities—this one big with a sad face, the next one bigger, face more sad, the next one bigger still, with gleaming eyes and a turned-down mouth.

How long was it going to take, anyhow? Would the match ever ignite? Had Wilmerdine fixed it to ignite, or was this a part of a plan to break his nerve?

Then it happened.

She came running into the clearing, her soft, dark hair loose and streaming behind her. She was running straight at Wilmerdine when the match flared.

She was too near the line of fire for Jarvis to chance it. He fought his finger off the trigger of the Whitneyville-Walker, yelling at the same instant for Wilmerdine to wait.

The yell accomplished nothing. Can lightning, once the flash breaks, wait? Wilmerdine had started his draw. To start was to finish. It is an impulse, almost

impossible of control—the rocking of the wrist, the pulsing of the trigger-finger. Released by the mind, it knows no master save consummation.

Even as Jarvis cried out, Wilmerdine's gun was slashing fire and lead across the clearing.

Almost in the same moment Teressa was upon him, fighting him with her body, her arms and legs around him.

"Roy had a gun!" she screamed. "I hid it! I got to him first and I put the gun under my clothes. Roy had a gun, Jeff!"

LATER, she told how it was about Roy's gun, how she had found it still in his dead hand and had hidden it away.

"I hated Jarvis for killing Roy," she said, wiping tears off her face with the palms of her hands, staring at Wilmerdine. "I couldn't be true to him, but I loved Roy. At first I was going to kill Jarvis myself, then I thought of you, Jeff, and knew you would kill him if you believed he had shot Roy when Roy was unarmed. So I hid the gun in the chimney of the room, and when Jarvis left I found you and told you the lie. Oh, please, Jeff, forgive me! I love you, Jeff! I can be true to *you!*"

She buried her face in the hollow of his throat and he looked across the fine glow of her dark hair and into the eyes of Blue Jarvis. He didn't speak, just looked, his face strained and moving and confused.

Jarvis returned his gaze for a long moment, smiling, then lifted his hand in an easy salute. "So long, Jeff," he said.

Wilmerdine still didn't speak. Jarvis turned and walked away slowly. He heard Teressa say:

"Is it over, Jeff? Please beat me! Please!"

He paused at the edge of the brush to catch the tenor of Wilmerdine's reply. Wilmerdine, though, didn't speak to the girl.

He lifted his voice to Jarvis. It was tight and hoarse.

"I'm glad I missed you, Blue. S'long!"

Inside the circle of brush Jarvis paused again and looked back. Teressa was still in Wilmerdine's arms and Wilmerdine was kissing her.

Jarvis grinned and moved on.

The stars seemed bright as he looked at them, and there over the bay a yellow web was forming in the sky. There would be a moon later on. A big round moon, a hunter's moon. Suddenly he felt big, bigger than the moon might be. Wilmerdine had scragged a shot, missed him. So he'd at last seen a weakness in the big Texan. It was a thing that consoled him, baited his ego.

Better still, he'd beaten Wilmerdine on the draw. In the same instant he'd called on Wilmerdine to wait he could have called on the old Whitneyville-Walker, and had he done so Wilmerdine would be dead.

Walking down the trail past Wilmerdine's cabin he began whistling, thinly, through his teeth, mocking the fear that had throttled him at Soldier's Farewell challenging it to come again, if it dared.

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The stick struck something soft and yielding

Identity—Dead Man

By SAM BRANT

Even after the wife of the dead man identified him, the marshal wasn't willing to call the case closed

ASA BEHRENS saw the trouble brewing as he stepped inside the Lucky Chance Saloon. Even if the two men had not been angrily facing each other, Asa could have picked out trouble in the unnatural stillness, in the wide berth other men were giving Rance Fisher and Galen Ordway.

A big white dog was at Fisher's heels, its teeth exposed snarlingly at Ordway. Ordway said something, and sudden fury contorted Fisher's face. Asa bounded forward, but he was too late to stop the blow. Fisher's fist smacked flush against Ordway's chin. The little man dropped as though he had been hit with a club.

Asa's face went tight with anger. Even without the advantage of the first blow, it would have been an unequal contest. Fisher stood six inches taller than Ordway and outweighed him by fifty pounds. In his face was a cruel lust as he stared at the unconscious man.

The white dog snapped at Ordway's leg.

"Fisher," Asa yelled, "stop that damned dog before I kill it!" His gun was ready, and his eyes blazed.

Fisher said sullenly, "Down, Tige."

The dog crept back to Fisher's heels. Its eyes malevolently watched every movement in the room.

Asa put his gun away and moved to the big man. He was as wide in the shoulders as Fisher, but he didn't have the height or weight. The humorous twist was gone from his lips, and a hot spark burned in his gray eyes.

He said with cold fury, "I ought to throw you in jail."

Fisher said mockingly, "Marshal, your badge has gone to your head. Find out your facts before you yell your head off. Ordway came in looking for trouble. He called me something I don't take from anybody."

Priam Hobart, who owned the general store, nodded reluctant agreement. He said quietly, "That's the way it was, Asa." He glanced with disfavor at Fisher. "I guess Ordway lost his head."

Asa could rely on it happening the way Hobart said, but that didn't change the fact of Fisher's long abuse and crowding of the little man.

He snapped, "Get out of town, Fisher. That's an order."

Fisher's eyes dropped before Asa's steady stare. His laugh carried a false note. He swaggered toward the door, the dog pressed close to his heels. He deviated from his course a few feet to chuck one of the saloon girls under her chin. He said something, and both of them looked at Asa. Their laughter made his blood boil, and he started forward. Hobart's hand touched his arm, stopping him.

ASA let out a gusty breath. The insolence and swagger in Fisher apparently appealed to women. But it made a man's fists itch.

Asa moved to the doors as they swung to behind Fisher. When he stepped outside, Fisher was crossing the street to a buckboard, drawn up on the other side. Hobart came out and stood beside Asa.

Neither said anything as Fisher climbed into the buckboard. A patient-faced woman sat in the seat, and Fisher roughly shoved her over as he sat down beside her. The dog bounded up into the back, wagging its tail at the woman. Fisher jerked the reins from her hands and lashed the team. The team broke into a wild run, the drum of their hoofs rolling from building to building.

An edge of anger was in Asa's voice. "I guess she's been waiting out there for him all this time. A man who would do his wife that way—" He broke off, shaking his head.

Hobart said in a tight voice. "She's put up with him for a long time. Sometimes I wonder—" He flushed before Asa's probing eyes, then laughed. "I feel about him like everybody else in town does. He's found fault with everything in my store. That's all, Asa." He nodded and moved down the street.

Asa grunted and walked back into the saloon. Ordway had recovered consciousness, spitting and sputtering under the glass of water someone had thrown into his face. He stood up, his legs shaky under him. He leaned against the bar, his face white with hurt and fury.

He said gaspingly," Some day I'll kill him."

Asa put a warning hand on Ordway's arm. "Stop that kind of talk, Galen. I've kept law and order in Red Rock town for

two years. Nothing will change it." He felt a quiet pride in his accomplishment, and no one was going to dim that pride.

Ordway said in a trembling voice, "He keeps crowding me. This morning, I found my fence down and a hundred head of his stuff around my spring. They'd cut the spring basin to pieces. Do I have to put up with things like that?"

Asa felt sympathy for this older, smaller man, but he kept it out of his voice. "There's legal ways of handling such things. Use them and get other kind of thoughts out of your head."

Ordway glared at him. He pushed away from the bar and walked unsteadily toward the door. Asa sighed. The trouble was thickening, boiling and bubbling like a hell's stew. He did not know if he could get the fires doused beneath it in time or not. . . .

In the morning he rode out to Fisher's Circle F spread. It was only six miles from town, and Asa thought sourly that it made it convenient for Fisher's drinking and carousing around. He stopped before the ranch house, appreciatively eying it and the outbuildings.

Fisher had a nice, successful place. Asa didn't know why the man couldn't be content with it. Fisher wasn't really interested in Ordway's place, which adjoined him on the west. The man just took a delight in offending weaker people.

Asa's mouth was a grim line. This time he would put it into words even Fisher could understand.

He hailed the house, and Mrs. Fisher came out. At one time she had been quite a beauty, and there was still more than just a trace of it left. Living with Fisher would have dulled any woman's looks. She seemed nervous this morning, almost fearful at the sight of him, and Asa thought Fisher must have taken his spite out on her last night. Fisher had been backed down before a good many eyes. He would turn his rage onto a defenseless woman. Asa didn't blame her for not liking the sight of any man.

He said, "Morning, Netty. Rance around?"

She shook her head, a quick, little bird-like gesture. One hand went to her throat. "He left early this morning for Billings," she said faintly. "He's supposed to be gone a week."

THE marshal nodded, his face wooden. He knew about Fisher's periodic trips to Billings. When the pleasures in Red Rock jaded him he set out for the more extensive pleasures of the larger town, forty miles away. That habit was known to everyone in town, and Asa thought it must be known to Fisher's wife.

He said, "Tell him I want to see him the minute he gets back."

She said, "I will," and turned quickly back into the house.

Asa stared at the closed door, then shook his head. He walked to his horse and mounted, looking curiously about before he rode away.

He saw a man he didn't know, coming out of the barn, carrying a saddle. He supposed it was a new hand. Fisher had a huge turnover in help. His temper was bad, and men in the vicinity who knew him wouldn't work for him. He had to depend on occasional saddle tramps, drifting through, to get new help.

Asa didn't see the white dog, and thought it probably would be with Fisher. He thought half sourly, half humorously, I guess every man's got something that really loves him.

He rode back and spent the rest of the morning making routine rounds of the town. As he passed Hobart's store Ira Gunther, the town banker, was just coming down the steps.

Asa said, "Morning, Ira. Priam in?"

"He's on a buying trip," Gunther grunted. "I hope he shows more judgment than he has been showing."

He nodded and plodded away. Asa grinned at his back. Ira doubted everyone's judgment when it came to financial matters.

The week passed uneventfully. Time always did, whenever Fisher wasn't in town. Asa wished there were some way he could keep him out of it for good.

He saw Netty Fisher in town at the end of the week and asked, "Rance get back?"

She shook her head, a shadow of worry in her eyes. "I haven't heard from him, Asa."

He let the subject drop, knowing it was embarrassing her. Fisher hadn't tired of the pleasures he found in Billings as quickly as he had before.

When Asa saw Netty Fisher at the end of the second week, her worry was more pronounced. He said, "Wait another couple of days, Netty. If he isn't back then, I'll make inquiries."

He went back to his office and sat down, a scowl on his face. He could do nothing about Fisher's personal life; he wished he could.

He heard the rapid drum of hoofs coming down Main Street and sat up, his head cocked. He recognized an urgency in the sound. He was at the door when Galen Ordway hauled up his horse before the office.

Ordway's face was terrified. He jumped down and ran toward Asa, panting, "Asa, that prospector who's been picking around my place blew himself up!"

Asa's eyes sharpened. He hadn't heard anything about any prospector. But it was a big country, and unless a man came into town, he could wander around for weeks without being seen.

"He'd been using dynamite," Ordway said in a shaky voice. "I heard this blast go off. It sounded pretty big, so I rode over. He must of had a defective fuse and didn't get out in time. I couldn't dig him out, Asa."

Asa said, "I'll get help."

He hurried down the street to the undertaker's. He got the undertaker, Goodman, and two other men to ride out with him.

It took an hour's hard digging to reach the remains. A man named Sealock turned his head and became violently ill when they found the mangled body. Even Goodman, as used as he was to handling corpses, looked pale.

One arm and leg had been completely blown off, and the face and head were so badly shattered that it was impossible to identify the man. Goodman spread out a blanket, and they gathered up the broken thing in it and carried it to the wagon. Asa noticed that the prospector had been a big man.

BACK in his office, he asked routine questions, and Ordway wasn't sure of anything about the dead man. He said the man's name was Jones, and he thought he had come in through Ramsburg, but wasn't even certain of that.

Ordway said worriedly, "He wanted to poke around, and I told him to go ahead. If I'd thought this was going to happen—" He stared at the floor, nervously popping his kunckles.

Asa said, "That's all, Galen. I'll try to find his family."

He moved to the window and watched Ordway go down the street. Ordway's progress was halted every few yards as curious men stopped him to ask details about the tragedy.

Asa moved back to his desk. He could send a wire to Ramsburg and try to backtrack from there. He thought he might have difficulty in learning anything at all.

Netty Fisher came into the office in the late afternoon. Her manner was harried, and her voice was so low Asa could scarcely hear it.

"I heard about the man being found, Asa," she whispered. "I'd like to see him to be sure."

"To be sure about what?"

"To be sure it isn't Rance. He's been gone so long—" Her voice broke, then steadied. "There's been so much trouble between him and Galen."

Her implication hit Asa like a blow. He said sharply, "How could you tell, Netty? The body was badly mangled."

Her voice was steady, though still low. "I think I could, Asa."

He couldn't talk her out of it, though he knew the shock she had coming. He went with her to Goodman's, and there he tried once more.

"Netty, this is pretty bad. Are you sure you want to?"

"I'm sure, Asa. If you don't mind, I'll go in alone."

He waited outside, picking up clods of dirt and snapping them from him. She was putting herself through a needless ordeal, but he knew how a woman's anxiety would drive her until she was satisfied.

She came out, her face bloodless, her eyes looking luminous in a stricken face. She reeled, and he reached out a hand and steadied her.

"It's Rance," she whispered.

"How can you be sure?" he snapped.

He thought her voice had failed her, then she said weakly, "Rance had a—a—" It was hard for her to say it. "A nude woman tattooed on his chest. He used to make cruel jokes about it. The tattoo is there, Asa."

Asa had seen it when he had helped remove the body. The tattoo was something with which Rance Fisher would have tortured his wife.

He said gently, "I'll see you home, Netty."

Color was returning to her face, and she shook her head. "I'm—I'm all right, Asa."

He watched her walk down the street. After the first shock had passed, he thought she would find a relief in this. His face hardened. Ordway had lied. The dead man was Rance Fisher. Ordway's impassioned words that night in the saloon came vividly back—"Some dav I'll kill him!" Asa thought grimly, that day had come.

He found Ordway still in town in the Lucky Chance Saloon. Ordway was retelling his story to an interested group. Asa touched him on the arm and said, "I want to talk to you."

When they walked outside, he said levelly, "I'm arresting you for the murder of Rance Fisher."

Ordway was stunned. "Rance Fisher?" he finally sputtered. "Asa, is this a bad joke?"

Asa said heavily, "I wish it were."

Ordway protested all the way to jail. He demanded wildly after the cell door had been locked on him, "How am I supposed to have killed him?"

"I think you shot him, then blew him to pieces. I'll check with Goodman to find the bullet wound."

Ordway shouted after him, "Why would I have ridden in after you? I wouldn't want him found. It was Jones, Asa! It was—"

ASA shut the door on Ordway's last words. It was an ugly business. He would not have thought such dark facets were in Ordway's character. Ordway had more than enough reason to kill Fisher, but the manner of doing it and the way he had announced it to the town! Asa scowled. It was a form of boasting and not like Ordway.

He found Goodman in his outer office and asked, "Did you find a bullet wound in the body?"

Goodman said, "I didn't look too close. It would be hard to find in the condition that body's in, anyway. Why, Asa?"

Asa said troubledly, "I think it's turned into murder, Goodman."

He went back to his office, remembering Ordway's extreme agitation when he had announced the finding of the man. He would not have thought it possible Ordway was such an excellent actor. His eyes narrowed. What if Ordway had been telling the truth? That opened a dozen new doors, doors Asa did not like to look through.

He went back to the cells and talked to Ordway a long time, but the man never wavered in his protestations. He said earnestly, "Asa, I know I said I'd kill Fisher. And I've been hot enough to do it. But the body you saw wasn't Fisher's." He looked hopefully at the marshal's face, but saw nothing there. "All right, Asa," he said flatly. "Believe it your way."

The more Asa thought about it, the more doubt grew in his mind. He waited until his night deputy, Bill Crate, came on and said, "Bill, can you handle things for a few days?"

Crate said, "What's up, Asa?"

Asa said gloomily, "I wish I knew."

He made the ride to Ramsburg that night, arriving there after midnight. He

checked in at a hotel and asked the clerk if he knew a man named Jones. He described Jones as best he could, and the clerk shook his head. Asa sighed. If there had been a Jones, he didn't think he would be lucky enough to run onto him at the first asking.

He was at the general store when it opened in the morning. He tried the general store and the hardware store, places that would be likely to outfit a prospector.

The man at the hardware store said, "Jones? Sure, I remember him. A big man. He bought new tools. I don't know where he was headed."

Asa said his thanks and left. So there had been a Jones. Ordway had not lied about that. And if that much of his story was so, how about the rest? But Netty Fisher had identified the body as her husband's.

Asa frowned as he climbed on his horse. It was possible that two men had identical tattoos, though not likely. The thing to do was to find Fisher.

Asa headed toward Billings. By hard, steady riding he made it by night. He did not know where Fisher stayed when he was in Billings, but he would guess at one of the better hotels. He asked in three of them, but Fisher hadn't been seen for a couple of months.

Asa moved down the street, a grave wonder growing in his mind. He tried the poorer hotels, and at the second, he struck information.

The clerk said, "I remember him. He was swelled up with his own importance." His description was a little vague. Fisher's manner had stuck with him more than his physical looks. "I got sick of hearing the name Rance Fisher," the clerk said. "Ask Mayme about him. She stayed a couple of nights with him."

A woman was just passing through the lobby, and the clerk called her over to the desk. Mayme was a blonde, the fading apparent, even in the poor light. She put an ingratiating smile on her face and said, "You want to see the town, Handsome?"

Asa drew her beyond earshot of the grinnning clerk. He asked bluntly, "Did you recently stay with a man called Rance Fisher?"

COLOR flushed her cheeks, and she said defiantly, "What business is it of yours?"

Asa flipped open his vest, showing the badge pinned to his shirt. "Is that enough?" he asked gravely.

There was a touch of fear in her eyes. "I didn't know him. He just—"

Asa said patiently, "I'm not trying to involve you in anything. Did he have a woman tattooed on his chest?"

Her face was flushed, but her voice was steady enough. "No," she said, "he did not."

Asa said soberly, "That's all I wanted to know."

He walked outside and stood in deep thought. The clerk's description had been vague, it could or could not fit Fisher. Yet someone had used the name, making sure it would be remembered. A man with a tattoo on his chest had been identified as Fisher. Another, using the name, was not tattooed. It was a mixed-up affair, and Asa didn't know where any of the tangled threads led.

He was dead tired when he got back to Red Rock, having ridden most of the night. He walked into his office, and Crate asked, "What did you dig up, Asa?"

"Nothing definite," Asa said wearily. "Go on home. I'll take over for the rest of the day."

He walked back to Ordway's cell, and Ordway put bright, fearful eyes on him. Asa said slowly, "Galen, your Jones passed through Ramsburg. I'm thinking you told it the way it happened."

Relief made Ordway go momentarily limp. Asa went on, "I haven't any answers yet. Until I find them, I'm holding you here for your own good."

He moved to the outer office and stretched out on a cot. Thoughts ran around in his head like scared rabbits until he finally fell asleep.

He had a couple of hours' sleep until dark, when he awakened. There was time to ride out to the Circle F. He had no ac-

cusations in mind—at least, not yet—but there were questions he wanted to ask Netty Fisher.

He swung off before the house and started to step onto the porch. He heard voices coming from inside, and his attention sharpened. He recognized the man's voice.

He eased off of the porch and made his way around the house and toward the barn. The new man he had noticed on his last trip here came out of it.

Asa asked. "Does Priam Hobart come out here often?"

The man's eyes rested on Asa's badge, then he said flatly, "I've seen him around a few times."

Asa looked toward the hills that began their gentle rise a few hundred yards behind the barn. "Is Tige around?"

"You mean Fisher's dog? I've been yelling my head off at him the past week. No one can get close to him."

Asa asked softly, "He won't even come to Netty?"

"No one," the man said emphatically. "Look!" he said sharply.

Asa's eyes followed the direction of the man's pointing finger. He saw the slinking form of a white dog at the foot of the hills. He caught just a flash of it, then it was gone.

The hired hand said angrily, "It gets on my nerves slinking around like that."

Asa nodded soberly and moved back to the house The storekeeper, Hobart, and Netty Fisher were on the porch. He bobbed his head at them and said, "I just rode out to see if there was anything I could do."

He thought she was bearing up well. There was rosy color in her cheeks.

Hobart's laugh sounded a little forced. "I rode out for the same reason, Asa. I'll ride back in with you."

He talked all the way back to town about poor Ordway, and Asa let him chatter. He was glad when the ride was over. He watched Hobart move on to his store, his eyes veiled. His suspicions were crystalizing, but he had three points to clear up.

HE WENT first to Gunther's house, and the banker said testily, "Don't you see me enough during the day?"

Asa grinned. "I do. But I want some information, Ira. Is Hobart in financial trouble?"

Gunther looked at him questioningly, but he answered readily enough. "He is, Asa. The bank almost owns his store."

"Ah," Asa said softly, and nodded his thanks.

He hoped Hobe Hamilton was still in town. The new hand had replaced Hobe at the Circle F. While he had been waiting for a new job to break, Hobe had been working at the livery stable. Asa found Hobe in the pool-hall and drew him outside.

"Hobe, why did Fisher fire you?"

Hobe twisted a hole in the dirt with the toe of his boot. "Aw, he—he didn't like—"

"Fisher didn't fire you, did he?" Asa shot at him.

Hobe's eyes went startled. "Aw, Asa, where'd you get such a loco idea?"

"Netty fired you. Because you came back when you were supposed to be someplace else."

Hobe sighed and said, "So you know about it." A little grin twitched his lip corners. "I walked into the bar and stepped plumb into the middle of something. I knew then I was looking for another job." He added fiercely, "I ain't blaming her none."

"It was Hobart with her, wasn't it?"

Hobe nodded. "I ain't told anyone else about this, Asa."

"Keep it that way," Asa said, and moved away.

He had motive now, and a knowledge of the persons involved. He had everything except a body. He waited until after dark and rode back to the Circle F. He swung wide around the house and rode into the hills back of the barn. If Tige was around, Asa thought Fisher would be someplace near.

He had the light of a three-quarter moon to see by, and he patiently tramped through the scrubby underbrush, swear-

ing as some branch whipped him across the face. He was beginning to think he would have to make his search by daylight when he thought he saw the flash of a white animal a hundred yards ahead of him. He whistled softly and moved slowly but steadily forward. The moonlight hadn't been playing him tricks. It was Tige he had seen, and the dog was pulling sullenly back before him, teeth bared.

Asa kept up a monotone of soft talk, and the dog's snarling changed to a whimpering. The dog had been used to human companionship, and without it was lost and afraid. Asa coaxed and coaxed, but could not touch the animal. He sat down, watching. The dog moved restlessly in a small radius, with one spot seemingly the hub.

The marshal got up and moved to the spot. The dog's snarl sounded menacingly as it bounded away. Asa thought the ground looked recently disturbed here. He scooped at the dry, sandy soil with his hands, then found a stick to aid his digging.

He had dug seven or eight inches, when his stick struck something soft and yielding. His face grew sick, and his stomach churned at the horrible odor coming from the opened grave, but he persisted until he had uncovered the upper half of the body. Decomposition had begun, but he could identify the man.

He squatted down and looked into the dead features of Rance Fisher. There was a great, gaping wound in the head, made by an ax or hatchet, he thought.

The dog quivered and moaned as though in intense pain. Asa pushed the dirt back and walked away. He looked back, and the dog was whimpering beside the grave. He thought it possible that the dog would never leave the spot.

As he rode back to town, he was thinking that Goodman had another distasteful job ahead of him. But not any more so than the one Asa had. . . .

THE following morning he paced the office with a slow, steady step, with more of reserved waiting in it than impatience.

Hobart came in, and Asa said, "Sit down, Priam. Be with you in a few minutes."

He had sent out word earlier that he wanted to see Netty. She should be along any moment now. He heard the rattle of wheels coming down the street and moved to the window. Netty stopped her buckboard, glancing fearfully at his office. Then she stepped down, carefully tied the reins and moved inside.

Hobart's eyes flashed, and he said indignantly, "Asa, what are you doing? Hasn't she been through enough?"

"Sit down," Asa commanded softly. "Here, Netty." He pushed a chair toward her. He asked in a low voice, "Netty, do you want to change that identification you made?"

She gave a strangled cry, and Hobart's suck of breath was sharply audible.

Asa said harshly, "You didn't identify Rance, Netty. That was the body of a prospector, just as Ordway said it was. But one of you—" He cut his eyes to Hobart—"saw a chance to make sure no doubt would ever fall on you. If the dead man was anywhere near the size of Rance, he would do. Everyone knew how much Ordway hated him. That hate was made to order for you two."

Netty Fisher's face was frozen, her eyes wide and terror-stricken.

Hobart said hoarsely, "Asa, are you crazy?"

Asa said sadly, "Netty, I know how these things work. No one would be blaming you too much, not even with murder in it, if you hadn't tried to push Ordway under. I'm thinking Priam talked you into it. He stood to get a part of your ranch, and he needed it."

Denial trembled on her lips, and Asa said, "I talked to Hobe."

She could not meet his eyes, and color suffused her face.

Hobart's voice shook. "Netty could have made an honest mistake. Where's your proof Fisher's dead?"

"You should have stuck to your original plan," Asa said. "As it was, you wasted your trip to Billings. I think you planned on moving Rance somewhere near Billings

and letting him be found there. But Ordway's prospector was too convenient." He rolled a cigarette and said almost casually, "You should have killed Tige, too. He led me to Rance. It seemed odd that the dog was afraid of Netty. Unless he had seen her do something to Rance."

That should have broken her. But she said unsteadily, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Asa swung his eyes to Hobart. "Did you tell her about the woman you stayed with in Billings? Mayme sent you her regards."

For an instant, Hobart's face was trapped before he could regain his mask. He shouted, "What are you talking about?"

Netty's face crumbled. Her eyes glittered insanely as she glared at Hobart. She had seen the truth in that instant of his breaking, and she screeched at him:

"He did it! I lured Rance out into the hills, and Priam split his head with an ax. I didn't know it was going to be like that. I didn't—" She covered her face with her hands and broke into hysterical sobs.

Hobart rushed toward her. "Netty!" he cried hoarsely. "Netty, you damned—"

Asa had been so interested in watching the byplay between them that he was unprepared for Hobart's sudden turn, and the flash of his hand toward a vest pocket. The hand reappeared, holding a derringer.

Asa shouted, "Priam, you fool!"

He jerked his gun free. He fired the instant Hobart did, and the tiny slug from Hobart's gun plucked at the shoulder of his shirt as it passed. Asa didn't miss. Hobart's face tightened with shock, then his jaw slackened, a vapid look extinguishing the light in his eyes. He reeled in a broken circle, the patch of dark stain growing on his shirt. He pitched forward on his face, his body twitching a little after he struck the floor.

Asa stared at him soberly before he looked at Netty. He thought heavily, No one ever really knows a man—unless it's the man himself.

He stepped over to the woman and placed a hand on her shoulder. He felt a deep pity for her. Hobart was the lucky one in this. But there were many extenuating circumstances, and perhaps a jury would listen to them.

He said gently, "Come on, Netty."

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DANGEROUS PATROL

By PHILIP MORGAN

Young Johnny Breen was more disturbed by his first love than by his first battle!

JOHNNY BREEN came out of the barracks into the hot June night and walked swiftly across the parade and down the line of flimsy buildings that housed the Post's noncommissioned officers and their families. At the last house along the row, he stopped and gave a low whistle. Almost at once the door came open and Kathy Mulvaney came out to him.

She was pretty, this daughter of A Troop's First Sergeant, with a small, oval face and a pert, tipped-up nose. She was seventeen and the dream of every unmarried enlisted man on the Post. But there was the devil in her and she let none of the men know her mind.

To Johnny Breen, she was everything he had ever wanted in a woman. She took his arm and guided him away from the house.

"Dad's sleeping and he'll be mad if we wake him."

She held his hand lightly, carelessly, and Johnny felt the hot pounding of blood in his head. He yearned to take her in his arms and kiss her full lips, but he didn't have the courage.

The girl knew it and teased him with her full-blown body. She let her hip touch him and knew that the touch went through him like flame. Johnny stopped in the shadow of the wall and turned to face her, his young face serious.

"We go out on the scout in the morning, Kathy, and I wanted to see you. There's a good chance we'll have a fight. The Sioux are getting restless."

"Are you scared, Johnny?"

"Yes," he admitted frankly, "but I'll do what has to be done." His words surprised her, showed her a tougher fiber than she had known he possessed.

SHE thought about him and her thoughts grew warm and her lips softened. She had played with him, making him jealous with her flirting, but she had known that in the end she would marry him. He was steady and honest, like her father, and would make her a good husband. Still, she didn't want him to be too sure of her.

"I hope everything goes all right on the scout, Johnny."

"I suppose," he said miserably, "that Bill Haines has been around to see you."

Haines was a corporal in A, older than Johnny, a wild and reckless man, a woman's man. Haines had razzed Johnny unmercifully about Kathy, telling Johnny that Kathy wanted him, Haines, more than any man on the Post. And Johnny had looked at the good-looking corporal and

Johnny kicked out at the attacking Sioux

supposed that it was true. But the thought of the girl in Haines's arms was a recurrent nightmare that set him wild.

"He hasn't been around yet," she said, and laughed. "But he will be." She was using Haines to make Johnny jealous, but she was really afraid of the man. She didn't want to play it too close. Now she sensed Johnny's hurt and touched his arm. "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

It took Johnny by surprise and set him back on his heels. It was what he had been hoping for, but to have her suggest it, jarred him.

He reached out and pulled her clumsily against him, kissing her gently at first. Then her soft body against him set the blood racing in his veins and caution and gentleness were forgotten as he crushed her to him and kissed her hard enough to bruise her lips. She let him have his way for a while, then pushed away and stood before him breathing deeply, surprised and shaken by the intensity of his kiss.

All her resolve about holding him off was gone. She wanted to rush back into his arms and smother his face with kisses. But then he spoke.

"I'm sorry I was so rough, Kathy," he said humbly.

That settled her down and made her angry. The young fool. Didn't he know a woman wanted him like that? She lashed him with her tongue, mimicking him.

"I'm sorry, Kathy," she said and her eyes were bright with her anger. "If that had been Bill Haines, he wouldn't have said anything about being sorry." She saw the words cut into him, hurting him, but she didn't care. "We better go back," she said.

He turned at once and they walked swiftly back through the warm Dakota night. He didn't touch her and she knew that he also was angry. But he would get over it. He was just a boy and he would be back begging her for another kiss. Kathy was young, but she knew men.

As they approached the house, they saw a shadow rise from the porch and stand waiting. When they were closer, they could make out the form of Corporal Bill Haines. Johnny saw the white flash of Haines' teeth as the older trooper smiled. Johnny should have been angry at finding him here, but his mind was cold and dead, and he felt nothing. Kathy had stung his pride bitterly and all he wanted was to get away. She thought he was young and foolish, and he didn't want her scorn any longer.

"Just dropped by, Kathy—didn't know you was busy," Haines said.

Kathy took the corporal's arm and said sweetly, "I'm not busy, Bill. You two come in and I'll fix some lemonade."

"No," Johnny said quietly, "I'll be runnin' along."

He stalked away, hearing Haines chuckle. But Kathy was surprised at first, and then a little frightened. It wasn't like Johnny to act that way. She began to worry; maybe she had pushed him too far. She wanted to call after him, but something told her he wouldn't come back. She was suddenly angry with Bill Haines, blaming everything on him.

"What did you have to come around for?" she asked hotly, then turned and ran into the house, crying, leaving Haines staring after her in mute surprise. . . .

THE scout detail rode out just at daybreak. Lieutenant Edwin Holmes was in command, a tall, hard-shouldered man, made bitter and taciturn by the rough life and the slowness of promotion. Beside him rode Fargo Meby, the civilian scout, small and wizened and tough, the best scout on the Dakota plains.

The twenty men rode slumped in their saddles, still half asleep, and in poor humor. At the gate, there were a few women and children, and some of the men straightened to wave a hand at a wife or child.

Kathy Mulvaney was there and she tried to catch Johnny's eyes, but he rode with his eyes straight-front and would not look at her. She knew then that she had really hurt his pride, and the fear that she had lost him choked her breathing. She didn't even see Corporal Bill Haines wave at her.

The detail was out on the open prairie when the sun came up and the world unfolded before them, a series of rolling hills sweeping away to the horizon, each like the one before. There was not a tree to break the monotony. The sun grew hot, burning through the men's shirts and sucking the moisture from their bodies. Dust rose in stifling clouds and clogged

noses and throats.

Johnny Breen settled miserably on the leather and tried to shut off his thinking, but without success. Kathy had made it pretty plain last night that she thought he was a mere boy, that she preferred Bill Haines. It was a maggot that twisted in his mind and threatened to destroy his sanity.

He thought of her kiss, so hot and startling, and wondered. Had it meant nothing to her? Then he shoved such thoughts roughly from his mind and concentrated on the patrol.

A trapper had reported in to the Post yesterday afternoon and had said that he and his two partners had been caught twenty miles out by a band of thirty Sioux braves. The Sioux had killed his companions, but he had hidden and escaped. The patrol was out to round up the offending band and bring them in.

The Sioux had been on the reservation through the winter, but now they were breaking out again. Each new outbreak had to be firmly met, or they would have a full-fledged Indian war on their hands. So now the patrol was searching for one small band of Sioux in a country crawling with Indians.

Johnny thought about it and was scared. He had been sent fresh from Jefferson Barracks last fall and he had seen no action before. The fear of being afraid rode with him now, and he wondered if he would act as young as Kathy thought he would.

"Still sky-larking about that girl, Breen?" Haines's tough voice cut through his thoughts. Johnny looked up. Haines was twisted about in his saddle, laughing back at him.

"Never mind," Johnny said.

"I sure like that little gal," Haines said. "Yes sir, she sure's got what it takes." He raised his hands and made some curves in the air.

Johnny felt tightness in his collar, and the red haze of murder spread before his eyes. "Shut up, Haines, or so help me, I'll kill you!"

At first Haines was inclined to laugh it off. Then he looked closer at Johnny's face, and he didn't like what he saw. When he twisted around in saddle again a chill ran down his spine. Beside him, Sergeant Ames, who had heard the exchange, laughed quietly. The troopers had no love for the vain Haines.

Lieutenant Holmes led them straight for Buffalo Creek and the ford where the trappers had been ambushed. They rode the twenty scorching miles at a good pace and brought up at the creek at eleven o'clock. Holmes held up his hand, stopping the column, and sent Fargo Meby ahead to look the place over.

The column dismounted and unbitted, watching the little scout jounce forward, riding awkwardly, and disappear over a rise. They waited in a welter of sweat and steaming horses, but they were in Sioux country now, and they were alert. They kept scanning the surrounding country with constant vigilance. They hadn't seen Sioux, but that didn't mean there weren't Sioux about.

A HALF-HOUR later Fargo Meby returned. He rode directly to where Holmes was crouched in the shade of his horse and said quietly, "I found them trappers, or what's left of 'em. Near as I can figure, there was about thirty Sioux in the band that done for 'em like the trapper said. They went west and they wasn't hurrying. I followed the tracks for a ways."

"Where's the nearest water in that direction?" Holmes asked, after a minute's thought.

"Yeller Crick. It's a place where Sioux like to camp."

"Then that's where they'll be. They didn't know one of the trappers got away, so they won't be expecting trouble yet. We'll try to surprise 'em. No sense in having bloodshed if we can help it."

"They'll be watching us."

"I know," Holmes said. "We won't go near the dead trappers and we won't follow the tracks of the band. We'll angle after 'em, staying well clear, and camp at the Buttes this afternoon."

All of this exchange carried plainly to the waiting troopers, giving them something besides rumor to speculate about. Holmes gave the order to mount and set them in motion at the steady, slow three miles an hour. Neither he nor the scout seemed to be worried. To all appearances, this was just another routine scout.

Johnny Breen ran over it in his mind as they rode, trying to imagine what Holmes was thinking. He had heard the scout say that the Sioux were probably camped at Yellow Creek, and wondered why they didn't ride directly there. Then he realized that the officer feared a trap and was taking steps to protect the command. Johnny had a great deal of respect for Lieutenant Holmes. The officer knew what he was doing.

His mind returned to Kathy then, and he called up a picture of her so real as to be startling. He saw the way her firm young breasts rose and fell under the cotton dress she'd worn, and he remembered the warmth of her body pressed against him and the eagerness of her lips. These thoughts tortured him, but they were worse when he saw a picture of her in the arms of Bill Haines. A faint groan escaped his lips.

At five o'clock they camped in the shadow of a series of buttes that rose suddenly and unexpectedly two hundred feet off the level floor of the prairie. They built their supper fires and made coffee and warmed their bacon. The guards were put out and the horses picketed, exactly as on any other night on scout. There was nothing different for sharp Sioux eyes to notice. And Johnny knew enough from the talk of the men at the Post to know that the Indians would be watching. This was the heart of their home country and they guarded it jealously.

Johnny wasn't due for guard until two, so he rolled into his blankets at first dark and tried to sleep. But the hurt and shame of that scene last night, when Kathy had laughed at him, came back and he couldn't sleep. He thought of Haines, making the gestures with his hands, and hate for the man bubbled up like gall in his throat.

Johnny decided that when they got back to camp, he would invite Haines out behind the barracks and beat him senseless, beat him until he was no longer good-looking. Then he remembered that Kathy liked the corporal, and knew he couldn't do it.

Lying there, looking up at the cold, distant stars, he had his bad moments. Maybe Kathy had seen something in him he didn't know existed. Maybe he was a coward and she had sensed it. He was about to go into his first fight and suddenly he was afraid, with a fear that was akin to terror.

What if Kathy was right? What if he *was* a coward, and broke and ran when the fight started? The shame of it turned him cold. But he was bone-weary from the day's hard riding, and his mind finally dulled and sleep came.

SERGEANT AMES woke the sleeping men at midnight. He went about kicking them unfeelingly, bringing them cursing to their feet. The horses were saddled and a half-hour later the detail rode out.

Now they all knew the plan. The lieutenant had purposely led them away from Yellow Creek, to lull the suspicions of the Sioux. And now they were marching to catch the Indians by surprise. It was a plan that might work.

They rode in gloomy silence across the dead-black prairie, relying on the animal instincts of Fargo Meby to lead them right. They felt their way ahead, their equipment muffled and silent, with only the thud of the horses hoofs to tell of their passing. They had even left the campfires burning below the Buttes as testimony that they were still there.

Every man rode with the coldness of fear in his heart, anticipating the coming fight. There was no better light cavalry in the world than the Sioux and the troopers could guess, but had no way of knowing whether the original thirty braves had been joined by others or not. The detail might well be riding into a

trap. But it was a chance they had no choice but to take.

They rode all that night and shortly before dawn came to the steep banks of Yellow Creek. There were trees here, huge cottonwoods that cut out what little light there had been in the open. The lieutenant led them down the bank to the edge of the stream, then turned and followed the creek westward. They were protected from discovery by the eight-foot banks.

Johnny felt the tension in the column as they drew closer. It was false dawn now and he could make out the hunched shape of Fargo Meby. The scout's jaws would be working hard at a chew of tobacco. Directly ahead, Johnny could see Bill Haines, and he cursed the man silently. Haines rode straight in the saddle, apparently undisturbed by the fear that touched the others. Johnny envied him.

They followed the stream for a mile, then halted. They sat their saddles and waited while pre-dawn darkness settled down again. They had a short wait before real dawn broke in the east. At the first light, Lieutenant Holmes and Fargo moved up the bank and scanned the country. When they returned Johnny saw by the officer's expression that their quarry was there. The lieutenant passed a quiet command.

"We will go out of here and advance on the village at a walk. The horse herd is between us and them and we'll cut them off from it. They don't like to fight on foot. No one will fire unless we are fired upon, or unless I give the order to fire. We want to take them in alive."

He turned in his saddle and lifted his arm. The detail marched over the rim of the creek bank and onto the prairie. The tepees of the Sioux band squatted some three hundred yards ahead, and the horse herd was a moving mass nearer. They went around the horses and pointed straight in at the camp. A dog barked, and then the camp was alive and warriors spilled out into the new day. Squaws cackled and screamed and the braves, no more than the thirty the scout had estimated, formed a solid rank in front of the cavalry. They were trapped and knew it. They could not reach their horses, so they waited in sullen defiance.

Holmes put his hand behind him and waggled it back and forth. The detail fanned slowly out into a line of skirmishers. They advanced on the Sioux, guns loose in their holsters, the flaps tucked back. Johnny sat stiff and straight.

Unless something went wrong, it looked as if they had pulled it off. The Indians didn't want to fight. They would rather submit now and be sent back to the reservation, then break away later. They had no respect for the white man's laws, but they did respect the fighting cavalry.

THE troopers were twenty yards from the Sioux when Lieutenant Holmes lifted his hand and halted them. He sat still in the saddle and waited. Finally, a tall buck stepped forward and held out his hand in the sign of peace. Holmes spoke to Fargo.

"Tell him we've come to take them back to the Fort. Tell them we don't like to do it, but that they have killed two white men, and my chief must talk to them about it."

Meby listened, then began talking in the guttural Sioux tongue, using his hands. When he had finished, the Sioux brave answered loudly, excitedly.

"He says they don't know nothing about it," Meby told Holmes. "He's lying, because I see a fresh scalp in the belt of that buck on his left."

"We'll move in on them," Holmes replied conversationally. "Don't fire unless I give the word."

He kicked his horse into motion and advanced on the Sioux. Johnny moved forward in the line, his hand resting on the butt of his service revolver. Sweat collected inside his hat-band and his skin prickled savagely.

They almost did it. They were ten feet from the line of motionless braves, and the first sagging of shoulders indicated that the Sioux had decided not to fight. Then one of them raised a hand in a too-sudden gesture and it broke through the

discipline of a new trooper named Ben Ferris. With a yell of pure terror, he drew his revolver and dropped the Sioux brave with a bullet through the heart.

Instantly the other braves raised their guns, and Holmes shouted, "Fire!"

Johnny's gun came up and out. He saw the Indian before him raising a rifle, snapped a shot at the man, and saw the savage melt to the ground. He kicked his horse forward to meet the inrushing Sioux and fired at the twisting brown bodies, hearing the wild yelling of the troopers and the screams of Indians.

A brave appeared suddenly at Johnny's knee, slashing up at him with a wicked-looking knife. Johnny kicked out and heard bone snap as his boot connected with the Sioux's jaw. But the kick threw him off-balance and another brave yanked him from his horse. He hit on his back and lay there, his wind knocked out, seeing the Sioux raise his knife for the kill, unable to move aside.

Then a horse and rider charged up, and a trooper split the Indian's skull with one crushing blow of his rifle butt. The Indian's blood spattered Johnny as he came groggily to his knees.

It was Haines who had saved him! But Haines was grinning at him, mocking him, and did not see another Sioux who rushed in, rifle lifted. Johnny shouted a warning, but Haines was slow in turning and took the Sioux's bullet in the belly.

Johnny shot the brave with the last shell in his revolver, then jumped to help Haines. The corporal slid off his horse into Johnny's arms and Johnny lowered him to the ground.

He cast a hurried look around, but the fight was over. A few Sioux were breaking for the creek and soldier fire was searching them out and dropping them. The weird wailing of the squaws had begun and it sawed at Johnny's nerves.

Lieutenant Holmes sat his horse in the midst of the carnage, on his face an expression of pure weariness. He was staring down at young Ben Ferris, who lay dead on the ground, a knife sticking from his chest.

JOHNNY knelt beside Haines, saw the blue color of the corporal's lips and knew the man was dying. He tried to think of something to say that would ease the man's going, but could think of nothing. All the hatred was gone now and he felt only pity. Haines looked up at him.

"Thanks for what you did," Johnny said.

Haines nodded weakly. "Tell Kathy I was thinking of her," he said, then his head rolled forward and he was dead.

The detail reported back in that evening. The men rode slack in their saddles, so tired they couldn't lift their heads. The fight had done that to them, and the brutal sun. Lieutenant Holmes rode with bowed shoulders, the deaths of the five troopers a terrible burden. No one talked.

Holmes dismissed them and Johnny took his horse to the stable, rubbed him down, and fed him. Then he went to the barracks and washed up. He had something to do and he wanted to get it done. He walked to the Mulvaney house and knocked on the door. Kathy answered his knock almost at once, and at the sight of him, her smile appeared, soft and warm and lovely.

"Oh, Johnny, I'm so glad you're safe!"

He had something to say and he said it quickly, not wanting to stay here.

"I wanted you to know that I was with Bill Haines when he died. His last thoughts were of you." Then, without saying anything more, he turned off the porch and headed back for the barracks.

He had gone twenty yards when she caught him. She took his arm, pulled him around, and looked into his face, the face of a man now. She was crying.

"I'm sorry, Johnny! I didn't mean to hurt you. I was a fool. Corporal Haines meant nothing to me. I just used him to make you jealous."

He didn't say anything and she thought for a minute he was going to leave her there. "Please, Johnny!" she pleaded.

Then she saw the wonder come into his face and the hunger and the wanting, and she came into his arms and returned his urgent kiss. ● ● ●

It was Friday the thirteenth in Boo Boo Bounce's bailiwick

Smiling unfriendly and holding a big six aimed at us is Hot-Lead Harry

Unlucky Day, and No Mistake

By BEN FRANK

I AM SETTING at the table, eating my breakfast, full of the jitters, when I happen to glance at the calendar. All of a sudden, I like to choke to death and feel my hair stand on end, my nerves being shot to pieces previous, anyway.

"My dear," I say hoarse to my wife, "do you know what day this is?"

"Yes," she answers cool. "It is the day you are going to take my sister's picture and buy a frame to put it in. So here is a dollar bill, and if you fail to—"

"It is Friday the thirteenth!" I say shuddery. "No matter if I am Deputy Sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., and afraid of no one nor nothing, I am not going to stir one step outside this house on a day when—"

"Hopewell," my wife says grim, "Friday the thirteenth or not, you are going to the jail as usual to work for that big fat idiot, Boo Boo Bounce. And on the way, you will buy a frame—"

Not being no hand to argue with my wife, I put on my hat and depart, taking along the picture, which shows my wife's youngest sister smiling sweet, with words writ across the bottom, saying, "With all my love, Lucy." Also, I take the dollar, me being flat broke.

Out on the street, I look about cautious, for there is no doubt about it, a man cannot be too careful on such a day; and working for such as Boo Boo Bounce, Sheriff of Coyote County, who has of a sudden become filled with romatics toward Polecat's new schoolteacher. Seeing nothing more dangerous than two pigeons cooing, I walk on.

The moment I step upon Polecat's Main Street, I see that luck is against me, for standing in front of Jigger Joe's Emporium is old man Bundy, talking to Mayor Mincemeat Malone and Judge Jackson. I start to tiptoe by, but the mayor sees me.

"Heard the news, Hopewell?" he asks me.

"News?" I say, wishing old man Bundy has a broken neck, he being editor of *The Polecat News* and a gent who prints the truth no matter who it hurts politically, including Boo Boo and I.

"Today," Mincemeat says, smiling toothy, "marks the climax of a great effort on my part to marry off my niece, Susie, to some young Polecatter."

"Do tell?" I murmur. "Who is the unlucky gent?"

"Sugarfoot Finnegan. But leave us not say he is so unlucky, for if Susie was not so skinny and homely, she would be—"

"I," Judge Jackson says, tapping his gold-headed cane pleasant, "am performing the marriage ceremony and—"

"Hopewell," Bundy cuts in, his beady eyes aglitter, "what is this I hear about strange noises coming from the jail at all hours of the day and night?"

"I do not know of what you are speaking," I say cool, and walk away like I have important business elsewhere.

But thinking of what is going on inside the Coyote County jail, my face breaks out with a clammy sweat.

I AM STILL thinking when I meet Miss Nancy Newling, the teacher, who is now on her way to the schoolhouse, she being very pretty with blue eyes and honey-blond hair which has be-dazzled Boo Boo no little. Just as I am all set to speak, who should step out from a doorway but Cowboy Crocker, who is not a cowboy, but is merely a singer of cowboy songs, and the kind of a young gent about whom the female Polecatters are no little atwitter.

Watching he and Nancy walk down the street together chummy, I again feel the clammy dew upon my brow. It is this Cowboy Crocker who is responsible for the raw state of my nerves.

I go on to the post office and find Mailman Moffett standing behind his letter window, smiling cheerful.

"Good morning, Deputy," he says. "I imagine you have came for the sheriff's mail, which consists of two letters. Incidental, one letter is from Professor Ignace Holler of Chicago, which makes the fourth Boo Boo Bounce has got from him. I cannot understand why a big fat halfwit like Boo Boo and this Ignace hombre would correspond thusly and—"

"Thank you for the letters," I say and make a run for the open door.

Heading on along the street toward the jail, I wonder how much longer I will have to keep dodging people's questions concerning Boo Boo's recent activities.

For a moment, I hesitate outside the jail office, listening. But all is quiet within, so I open the door and enter.

Boo Boo is seated behind his desk, twiddling his fat thumbs and frowning severe with his pink round face. He sighs deep,

making his three chins quiver mournful.

"Deputy," he says, "being in love with such a tasty dish as Miss Nancy Newling is no little strain, and no mistake! Sometimes I wonder— What's that?"

"Mail," I say, putting the two letters on his desk.

"I mean in the other hand?"

I look down at my left hand and realize I have been so worried that I forgot to stop someplace to buy a frame for Lucy's picture. I explain about this in detail.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says, wagging a finger at me, "do I understand correctly that your wife has give you one smackeroo this morning to buy a picture frame with?"

"That is right," I answer.

"Kindly leave me have a close look at said money."

I dig out the dollar and hand it to him unsuspecting.

Smiling broad, he tucks it into a pocket. "Deputy, I wish to thank you no little for solving one of my many problems, namely where to get money to buy some flowers for—"

"But, Boo Boo," I cry in alarm, "if you steal my dollar—"

"Hopewell," he says cheerful, "should you dig into the bottom drawer of my desk, you will find a framed photograph of my Aunt Sophia Bounce of Boston. Leave us say I have sold you Aunt Sophia's frame for this lovely ringer."

"But—"

"No buts, Deputy. As you know, Miss Nancy is bringing her pupils to visit the jail this afternoon, and a few-odd flowers in a vase will add a cheerful note which will be greatly appreciated by her and— Ah, ha!" he says, picking up a letter. "It is about time I heard from Professor Ignace Holler again."

He tears the letter open and reads it. "So that is my trouble," he says, blinking at me. "The professor says I have not been opening my mouth wide enough."

Tucking the letter into a pocket, he heads for the door. "Boo Boo," I say, "here is another letter."

"Deputy," he says, scowling from under his hat, "kindly never, never bother me with a second letter until I have took care of the first."

With that, he waddles outside, leaving me alone.

THERE is nothing for me to do but pull out the bottom drawer and find Aunt Sophia, who looks at me out of baleful eyes. The frame is somewhat mildewed and not what one would expect for a dollar off a store shelf, but I remove Aunt Sophia and put in her place my wife's sister, Lucy.

Just as I finish and lay the picture on the desk, face down, the door opens, and in walks old Bundy, a evil grin on his face.

"Decided I'd better come over and talk to Boo Boo about them noises," he says, setting down comfortable.

"Boo Boo has stepped out on business," I say aloof.

"Likely gone someplace to eat," Bundy says. "If he worked half as hard as he eats, he'd— Say, how come you got that mattress hung over the door to cell number two?"

He leaps to his feet and heads for the cell door.

"We," I say as calm as possible, "have hung all the jail mattresses up in that cell to air out."

"Why?" he asks suspicious. He trots to the barred door, shoves the mattress aside and peers in. "Hopewell," he says, "having all the mattresses in here is peculiar indeed, and I smell a dead rat."

At that moment, Boo Boo walks in, carrying a bundle of flowers stuck in a glass vase.

Seeing the flowers, Bundy's eyes pop. "Boo Boo," he yips, "what is going on here, anyhow?"

"Have you forgot there is a wedding today?" I say, thinking fast. "Can't a sheriff buy a few-odd flowers to give to the bride?"

"Yes, indeed," Boo Boo says hasty. "Friend Bundy, I see you have noticed we are airing our mattresses. You might

put that in your paper, showing how I and my deputy are no little particular about the sanitary condition of the jail. Also, leave me add that I have invited Miss Nancy Newling and her pupils to visit the jail today, thusly showing them crime does not pay. Now, if you will kindly depart, leaving me and my deputy alone to get busy with our numerous duties, I—"

"Poof!" Bundy snorts. "This is a public office, and you cannot run me out."

At that moment, the door opens again, and in walks a whiskery old gent by the name of June Juniper, who lives in the Squaw Hills and cuts fire wood which us Polecatters burn in winter to keep warm by.

"Sheriff," he wheezes husky, "I need your help no little!"

At that, Bundy smiles anticipatory, waiting to see what old Juniper wants Boo Boo to do, knowing if it is any kind of work, Boo Boo will hate to do it.

Boo Boo blinks at Juniper unhappy, but says, "Leave me go on record that I never shirk my duty. What is it you wish, friend Juniper?"

"To help me catch a mosquito."

Boo Boo swallows wrong and like to choked to death. Bundy's grin grows wider.

"It is like this, Sheriff," old Juniper goes on. "Someplace in my cabin there is a mosquito about the size of a bumblebee, who is too smart for me. For a week, the moment I lay down, he comes buzzing around and about my ear, but when I try to find him, he hides. Now, a man cannot rest or sleep with a big fat mosquito."

"Ha!" Boo Boo says, his face turning a bright red. "I will not go chasing after no mosquito!"

"Heh, heh!" Bundy chuckles. "You ain't afraid of a mosquito, are you, Boo Boo?"

"No!" Boo Boo roars. "But whoever heard tell of a sheriff being called out to find a mosquito?"

"Sheriff," Bundy says, a evil glitter in his eyes, "what was that you said about never shirking your duties?"

Boo Boo shoves to his feet. "All right," he says hoarse. "Come, Deputy, leave us go assist our fellow citizen. As for you, Mr. Bundy, I repeat: I, Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce, find no duty too small or insignificant for me to attend to personally!"

Grinning happy, Bundy follows us outside. We ignore him and saddle our horses. Then I boost Boo Boo up into his saddle, and we ride out toward the Squaw Hills.

"Boo Boo," Juniper says, "If you find that mosquito, I'll vote for you, no matter who's running agin you."

What Boo Boo says under his breath, I will not repeat.

UPON arriving at Juniper's two-roomed cabin, we go in and search high and low. But we cannot find no mosquito hiding.

"I cannot understand it," Juniper says weary, setting down on a chair. "I figured two sharp-eyed lawmen could find it."

"Phooey!" Boo Boo says disgusted. "I bet there wasn't no mosquito in the first place. I bet old Bundy put you up to bringing us on this wild goose chase!"

Juniper tears his whiskers and cusses and declares there has been a mosquito keeping him awake for a week.

On the way back to Polecat, Boo Boo says furious, "Think of the time we have wasted when I should of been following Professor Ignace Holler's instructions about opening my mouth wider than previous."

I say nothing to this, but feel a shudder run along my raw nerves.

It is some past noon when we arrive in Polecat, so we stop at Stinky Joe's to eat, it being the only restaurant in town. Who should we see setting on a stool at the counter and staring hopeless at his food but Sugarfoot Finnegan who's about to get married to Susie Malone that afternoon. I set down beside him to cheer him up.

"A lot of things could be worse than getting married," I say pleasant. "Like having double pneumonia, or—"

"Hopewell," he says husky, "it never occured to me till just a few minutes ago

that today is Friday the thirteenth. Now, getting married on a day like this—"

"Phooey!" Boo Boo says scornful. "Anybody knows it is no worse to get married on Friday the thirteenth than any other day."

"Nonetheless," Sugarfoot says, "I am no little agitated." With a deep unsteady sigh, he puts on his hat and departs, leaving behind his dinner untouched.

"I," Boo Boo says sotto voice, "would be utmostly happy to marry Nancy Newling Friday the thirteenth, or any other day, and no mistake! If only I can get practiced up so's I can—"

At that moment, Stinky Joe sets down the food, and we eat. Finished, we put on our hats and hurry to the jail and go in.

"Lock the door, Hopewell," Boo Boo says, and I do.

"Now, to try out Professor Holler's advice," he says, smiling hopeful. "Who knows, maybe if I open my mouth wide, I will be able to sing as well as Cowboy Crocker. Once I get the hang of it, I will tell Miss Nancy how I have took lessons by mail clear from Chicago and— But leave us waste no time on conversation. Help me with the mattresses, Deputy."

Feeling somewhat faint, for I have stood about all of Boo Boo's singing practice possible, I help him arrange the mattresses so they cover all windows and the door of cell number two, thusly muffling Boo Boo's singing so the outside world will not be unduly alarmed. Then I return to the office, pull a chair up by a window where I can keep guard, and set down.

"All clear!" I yell, and Boo Boo begins to sing.

Even muffled by the mattresses, I am reminded of a buzzsaw cutting through a railroad spike. The next thing I know, my trembling fingers have opened the second letter on the desk, and I am reading something that makes me forget Boo Boo for a moment. This letter is a notice that Hot-lead Harry has escaped from prison, he being a native of Coyote County and a gent who hates all lawmen in general and Boo Boo and I in particular.

With a shudder, I drop the letter beside Lucy's picture. I gaze at the flowers and wonder if they will not do for Boo Boo's funeral. Also, mine. And hearing him singing, I can imagine he is dying slow and painful at the hands of Hot-lead Harry. And me, also.

JUST as I am at the breaking point and cannot stand another bellow, Boo Boo stops singing. The silence is almost as bad as the noise, only it don't last but a second. The cell door rattles open, and Boo Boo stumbles into the office. His mouth hangs open slightly, his face is white, and his eyes stick out like knobs on a drawer.

"Deputy," he wheezes in a mumbly voice, "do something!"

Looking at Boo Boo, I forget Hot-lead Harry.

"What is the matter with you?" I gasp.

"My jaw!" he mumbles. "I was practicing opening my mouth wide to sing when all at once it popped out of joint. Now I cannot get my teeth together. Quick, help me to a doctor!"

I unlock the door, and we rush across the street to Doc Pink-pill Porter's office. But his door is locked tight, and a sign says, "Gone fishing today."

Boo Boo is fit to be tied. "Now," he mumbles aggravated, "I will have to go around all day with my face in a twist and my teeth not clicking! Hopewell, how will I eat?"

"You may have to eat through a straw," I say.

"Sometimes I wonder if love is worth the bother," he mumbles lopsided. "First, I spend ten dollars to learn to sing. Then I open my mouth wide, and—"

"Boo Boo," I interrupt, "is that not old Bundy going into our office?"

"It ain't nobody else, and no mistake!" Boo Boo says husky.

Worried no little, we rush across to the jail. Stepping into the office, we find old Bundy setting at Boo Boo's desk, reading the letter which tells about Hot-lead Harry's escape.

"Ah, ha!" Bundy says, his mouth grim.

"Holding out on the press about the escape of a dangerous criminal, who will likely return to his hometown and murder—"

"What?" Boo Boo says excited. "Leave me see that letter. Also, leave me say I do not care for no pickle-faced, snoopy-nosed gent like you reading my mail, and no mistake!"

"You can't fool me," Bundy says scornful, handing over the letter. "You are just trying to make me think the reason you ain't done nothing about Hot-lead Harry is because you ain't read this."

"Shut up!" Boo Boo yells. "How can a man concentrate on his mail with you—Oh, oh!"

He turns deathly pale and sinks down on a chair. "Deputy," he asks hoarse, "did you know that Hot-lead Harry had—"

"Boo Boo," Bundy says, staring hard at Boo Boos fat twisted face, "what has happened to you? Have you had a stroke, or—"

"His jaw is out of joint," I explain.

"His—Ha, ha, ha! That's a new one. So that is the reason you'll give the voters for not being out running down Hot-lead Harry. Ha, ha, ha!"

"It ain't funny!" Boo Boo yells. "I can't get my teeth together and will likely starve to death."

Bundy wipes his eyes and gets his breath back. "What a act!" he says. "Jaw out of place—but you ain't foolin' me, Boo Boo. You are scared to death of Hot-lead Harry."

"I," Boo Boo cuts in wrathful, "caught Hot-lead Harry once, which is proof I ain't scared to death of him."

"Caught him accidental," Bundy says sneerful. "You happened to find him asleep in a haystack."

"That is neither here nor yonder," Boo Boo cuts in icy. "The point is a man cannot go around and about looking for a desperate character, with his jaw unjointed."

Bundy laughs again somewhat unfunny. "Kindly explain how you popped your jaw out of place."

"Well," Boo Boo says, "I was—"

He stops of a sudden, and his fat face turns a rosy red, him being no little reluctant for people to know he has took singing lessons in order to compete vocally with Cowboy Crocker for the attention of Miss Nancy Newling, who is no little fond of a loud baritone.

"Go on," Bundy says, his eyes aglitter.

"It is like this," I say helpful. "Boo Boo yawned very wide. There followed a pop from his jaw joint, and—"

"What a story this will make in next week's *Polecat News!*" Bundy says happy. "Big fat sheriff opens big fat mouth and—"

"Bundy," Boo Boo gurgles, "if you print that—"

THE DOOR whams open, and in walks Mayor Mincemeat Malone, his bony face a angry red. Behind him comes Judge Jackson, his gold-headed cane rattling furious on the floor. Following these two are numerous citizens all dressed up for the wedding, including a number of Polecatters' wives looking very indignant.

"Boo Boo," Mincemeat says in a shaky voice, "the worst has happened, and I demand the law go into action!"

"Yes, indeed!" Judge Jackson says. "Come alive, Boo Boo."

"It is like this," the mayor goes on. "We are all set to marry off my niece, Susie, and what should happen but the groom don't show up."

"The cowardly rat!" one of the ladies says.

"A man cannot tolerate a young skunk like Sugarfoot Finnegan failing to show up to marry his only niece," Mincemeat continues wrathful. "Therefore, I wish to charge said Sugarfoot with disturbing the peace, being a menace and breaching a contract. Go find the varmint, Boo Boo, and lock him up!"

"I," Boo Boo says faint, "am incapacitated at the moment on account of my jaw being somewhat out of joint, so—"

"What he means," Bundy pipes up, "is that he is afraid to leave the jail because Hot-lead Harry has escaped from prison."

A sudden hush falls over one and all, for everybody knows that Hot-lead Harry is not to be treated lightly, him being very handy with a loaded sixgun and no little careless as to who he aims it at.

Suddenly there is a mournful moan from none other than the bride herself, namely Susie Malone.

"I knew it," she wails. "I knew that poor dear Sugarfoot wouldn't run out on me on purpose. That awful Hot-lead person has either kidnapped him or shot him!"

"Oh, oh!" Judge Jackson says, looking about fearful. "Who knows, Hot-lead may he hiding someplace in town right at this moment, waiting to get revenge."

Women begin to groan and scream; and in a minute, everyone is on their way home, except the mayor and the judge and old Bundy.

"Well, Boo Boo," Judge Jackson says impatient, "what are we paying you for? To set there and look scared to death?"

"I am not scared to death!" Boo Boo says, his three chins quivering somewhat off balance. "Leave me go on record as saying that if my jaw was not out of place, I would buckle on my trusty six and—"

"Prittle-prattle!" Bundy cuts in. "When Boo Boo got this letter about Hot-lead Harry, he pops his jaw out of place on purpose so's to have a excuse to not go looking for him."

"That is not true!" Boo Boo flares. "I was in cell number two, practicing on my—"

He remembers just in time and stops talking.

"Practicing what?" Mincemeat yells.

"Boo Boo was practicing yawning," I say helpful.

"Yawning!" Mincemeat roars. "Is that all our sheriff has to do? Just set around and yawn his jaw out of place?"

"Boo Boo," Judge Jackson says frigid, "leave me add one comment. If you do not do something about this Hot-lead Harry, as well as find the missing Sugarfoot, come next election you will find yourself out in the cold, politically speaking!"

Moving like a old, old man, Boo Boo gets to his feet and mops his clammy face. "Gents," he mumbles hollow, "leave me say that I, Boo Boo Bounce, always gets his man, regardless of what is wrong with me, including sickness, stormy weather, ice, sleet or snow, or a unjointed jaw. Come deputy, leave us get busy."

"You mean go look for Sugarfoot and maybe run the chance of running head-on into Hot-lead Har—"

"Precisely!" Boo Boo says. "Load my trusty forty-four and leave us perform the grim and bloody task that may lie before us without flinching. Jaw or no jaw, rain, sickness, flood—"

"You said all that before," Bundy says, grinning happy.

BOO BOO ignores him. With a unsteady hand, he digs his .44 out of the wastebasket where he keeps it unloaded, him being no little gun-shy, and gives it to me to load. Which I do. Pale as paper, he takes the gun careful betwixt thumb and finger and lowers it into the holster. I cradle my double-barrel shotgun and lead the way out to our horses at the hitchrail. After boosting Boo Boo into the saddle, I climb aboard my mount.

"Do, or die!" Boo Boo says; and we ride out of town toward Sugarfoot Finnegan's homestead, which lies on the other side of a very lonely canyon, which cannot be beat for a place for outlaws and such to hide in.

I am thinking of the dangers of being a deputy, also not forgetting it is Friday the thirteenth, when Boo Boo turns off the trail into a shady hollow.

"Hopewell," he says, "leave us spend a few hours here, rather than run any unnecessary risks of meeting up with Hot-lead Harry."

"But," I say bewildered, "how can we find Sugarfoot Finnegan by stopping here?"

"I have been giving that no little consideration," he says, "and have reached the conclusion that finding Sugarfoot can wait till some future date. Also, a man with a displaced jaw should take it easy."

He sets down in the shade with a weary sigh.

"Deputy," he says mumbly on account of his jaw not working properly, "if I had it to do over again, I doubt if I would have succumbed to Miss Nancy's charms to the extent of competing vocally with Cowboy Crocker. At the moment, I would welcome a opportunity to abandon my role as a singing Romeo should said opportunity present itself, and no mistake!"

"Make your own opportunity," I say hopeful.

"Oh, no!" he says horrified. "Being a gentleman of the old school, I could not jilt no sweet, innocent young lady such as Nancy Newling!"

To this I say nothing, but set there recalling bitterly the times I have suffered by listening to Boo Boo's singing.

After a lapse of several hours, we ride back toward Polecat. By the time we arrive at the mayor's office, it is getting dark. We go in, and Boo Boo reports we could not find hide nor hair of Sugarfoot Finnegan.

But Mincemeat Malone has little to say, one way or another, him being a very disappointed gent who has did his best to marry off his niece and failed. Seeing we can not cheer him up, I hustle Boo Boo through the door out into the evening shadows.

"What a day this has been!" Boo Boo mumbles. "If I was not so un-superstitious, I might believe that being Friday the thirteenth— Leave us see if Pink-pill Porter has returned yet to put my jaw back where it belongs."

We wander over to the medico's office, but he is still out fishing someplace, it is hard to tell where.

"I am hungry," Boo Boo wails. "A man cannot live, eating his supper through a straw. If old Pink-pill don't show up pretty soon, I will die of starvation."

"Maybe we can get my wife to chop up your supper with the sausage grinder," I suggest.

"Humm," he says. "That is a idea I hadn't thought of. Oh, oh!"

Glancing up, I see why he is oh-ohing, for hurrying toward us is old man Bundy, looking like the cat who has et the goldfish.

"I see you failed to find either Sugarfoot or Hot-lead," he says. "Well, I ain't surprised. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if you had spent the afternoon setting in the shade in some safe place."

"Mr. Bundy," Boo Boo says, "I resent them insinuations no little. Even with my jaw on the blink, I have searched until darkness obscured all traces of our quarry."

"Yeah, I bet!" Bundy says. "How about it, Hopewell?"

"How about what?" I ask innocent.

"Skip it," Bundy says and walks away, snorting.

We step into the jail office, and Boo Boo says, "Light the lamp, Deputy."

I light the lamp, and we put up our guns and set down. Suddenly Boo Boo lets out a squawk.

"Deputy," he bleats, "this was the day Miss Nancy and her pupils was to visit the jail, and I plumb forgot—"

THERE comes the sound of a door opening, and we turn about. Smiling unfriendly at us and holding a big six in his fist is none other than Hot-lead Harry, with a black stubble on his chin and his cold gray eyes like ice down your neck.

"Hello, boys," he says. "Boo Boo, it looks like you've gained forty pounds since that day you found me sleeping peaceful in a haystack."

Boo Boo is too scared to stand up. He runs a tongue over bloodless lips, while his chins quiver no little helpless.

"Hot-lead," he says husky, "you would not shoot a man crippled by a out-of-joint jaw, would you?"

"Depends who the gent is," Hot-lead replies. "If it is you, the answer is yes! Stand up like a man, Boo Boo, and leave us amble back to that cell where the mattresses are hanging about. You too, Hopewell. With a mattress over the door and others over the windows, no one will likely hear the shots."

Recalling how the mattresses muffled

Boo Boo's singing, I know Hot-lead is right. Boo Boo stumbles to his feet and moves toward the cell, with me following fearful.

But just as I reach out to push the mattress aside from the door, the front door slams open again, and in rushes old June Juniper.

"Boo Boo," he pants, "I have come to apoligize. I run acrost old Pink-pill Porter fishing, and he said it wasn't no mosquito a-tall, keeping me awake. It was head noises, and he said it was likely caused by a limb that swatted me acrost the ear when I cut down a tree the other day. So I am utmostly sorry I— Hey, what's goin' on here?"

"Shut up and don't move!" Hof-lead says grim. "I—"

At that moment, the mattress comes sailing through the open door of the cell, striking Hot-lead and knocking him off balance. Before he can swing his gun around, Boo Boo has kicked his feet out from under him and the next thing I know, is setting on him very weighty. Standing in the cell doorway is none other than Sugarfoot Finnegan, who throwed the mattress when Hot-lead turned his gun on old Juniper.

"It's like this, Boo Boo," Sugarfoot explains after we have locked up Hot-lead and June Juniper has gone on his way. "I thought about this being Friday the thirteenth, and the more I thought, the scareder I got. So instead of going to get married, I sneaked in here when you and Hopewell was out. Seeing as how you had this cell door and the windows covered with mattresses, I figured here would be a good place to hide in.

"But now I ain't no longer so scared. In fact, I would like to marry Susie, but now I know she won't have me on account of I run out on her like a coward."

"Don't worry," Boo Boo says. "I will fix everything. I will say the reason you failed to show up at the wedding is you spotted Hot-lead Harry and followed him around and about, hoping to assist me to arrest him, which you did. Thusly you will be a hero to one and all, and Susie will forgive and forget."

This makes Sugarfoot so happy that he gives Boo Boo the five smackeroos he had intended to pay Judge Jackson for tying the knot at the wedding. Then he bids us adios and departs, whistling mighty chipper.

This is when Boo Boo happens to find the note on his desk, lying beside Lucy's picture. Reading it, his three chins begin to quiver. "Deputy," he says hoarse, "read this!"

"Dear Mr. Bounce," I read. "The children and I came to visit your jail this afternoon, but you were not here. I just happened to see Lucy's picture with all her love to you on your desk and can only say I hope you will be happy with her, whoever she may be. Good-by forever. Nancy Newling."

"You," Boo Boo roars, grabbing me by the shoulders, "should ought to have knowed better than to leave your sister-in-law's picture on my desk! Even face down!"

He gives me a violent shake; and I lose my balance and fall against him, banging my head hard on his chin. There follows a slight pop, and I think for a moment I have cracked my skull wide open.

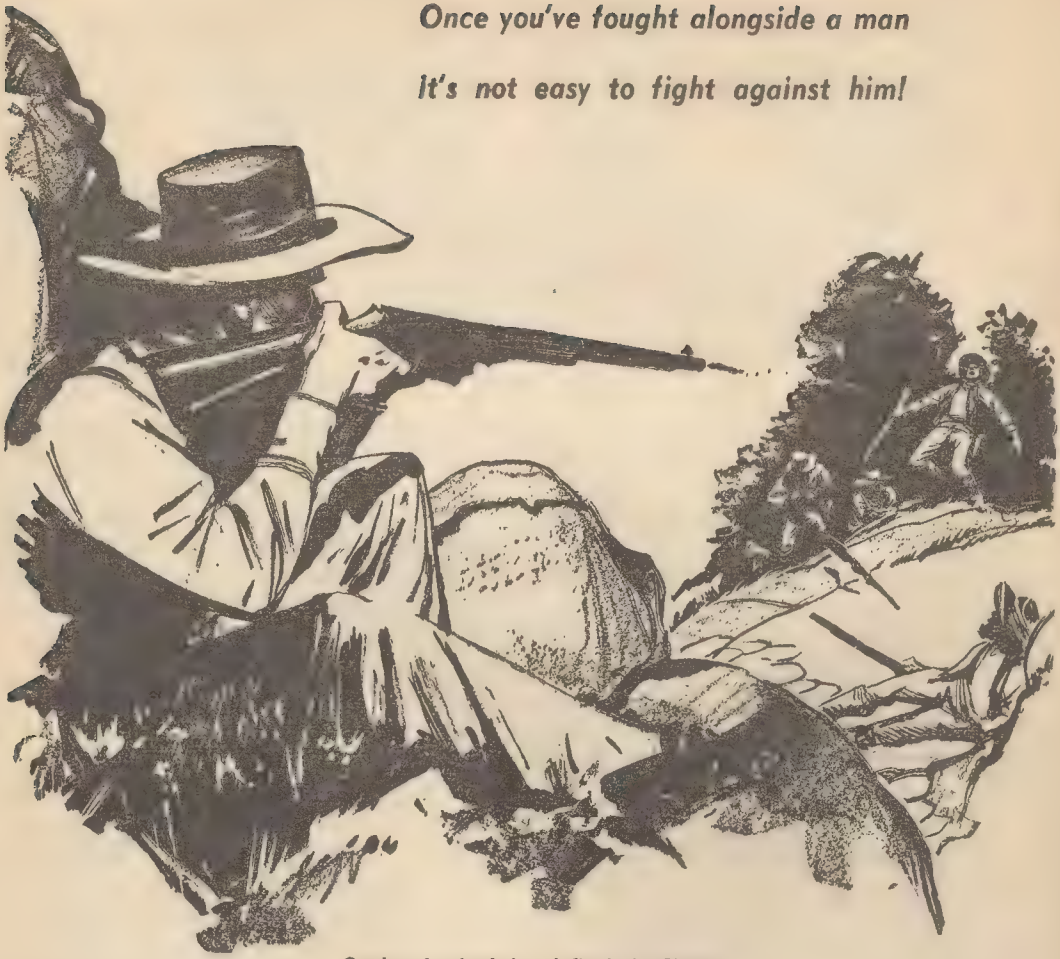
Of a sudden, Boo Boo releases me. "Why," he says, surprised, "my jaw works as good as new! Also," he says, smiling pleasant, "come to think of it, now that Miss Nancy has told me good-by forever, I no longer have to take singing lessons from Professor Ignace Holler.

"Hopewell," he says, setting down very content, "it must have been your head bumping my chin what knocked my jaw back where it belongs, thereby saving me a doctor bill. Here is two dollars, which is your split of what old Pink-pill Porter would likely have charged me. Now, kindly pick up Lucy's picture and go home, thusly leaving me alone to recuperate from today's mishaps."

I put on my hat and depart, thinking it is not so bad after all, working for a fine, generous man like Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce, even on such a day as Friday the thirteenth ● ● ●

Once you've fought alongside a man

It's not easy to fight against him!



Graybeard reloaded and fired the Sharps

GOLD TROUBLE

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

AL FORREST touched cracked lips with the tip of his parched tongue. He passed the back of a dirty hand across his mouth and squinted up at the sun which glared murderously down on the baked Arizona hills. The water-hole stretched in front of him, cracked and flaked. Rusty, his roan horse, nickered piteously. Al got up suddenly and teetered for a moment on his heels.

"Dry as a bone, Rusty," he said quietly.

For the first time in many years Al had that bitter forlorn feeling of being licked. By all rights the hole should have held a mouthful of water. His memories of the Grindstone Range were hazy, but he had never known a time in the old days when water was so scarce.

Resting his head against his saddle, he fought down the panic that gripped him. Suddenly he jerked his head back. The echoes of the shot that had startled him boomed and reverberated along the shallow canyon. He jerked his Winchester from its sheath and ran for a nearby clump of rock, leading Rusty. It was Apache country.

With his mount under cover Al dropped behind a flat rock himself. He levered a cartridge into the chamber of his Winchester and slid it forward. Heat waves shimmered and danced along the flat canyon floor.

There was no sign of life. But it was too damned quiet. Al began to curse himself methodically. His craving for gold had led him into this tight—a hunt started after hearing a drunken prospector's wild stories of the Lost Ghost Mine.

Al had been down on his luck at the time, so he had started out with too little grub and not enough knowledge of the Grindstone country. He had been warned about Apaches, too. Now here he was holed up without water, waiting for the red devils to dig him out.

Something moved down the canyon. A man crawled from beneath a mesquite bush, looked behind him, then trotted up the canyon. Al squinted against the sun. The man was short. His gray beard bobbed comically with each jerky step. He held a long Sharps rifle cradled in his arms. He dropped behind a ledge of rock and slid the Sharps over it.

The big rifle bellowed and a puff of smoke drifted off. A tall man stood up from behind a clump of brush at the mouth of the canyon, did a queer, awkward dancing step, then fell flat on his face. The sun glinted on the barrel of the rifle he had dropped.

AL WHISTLED softly. That was damned good shooting.

Graybeard slid backward, wriggled his way up the slope, dropped into a depression and reloaded the Sharps.

Another rifle cracked crisply at the mouth of the canyon and a spurt of dust rose over the old man's previous position. A man wearing a checked shirt stood up and peered down the canyon. Graybeard's second shot whipped his hat from his head. The man cursed and dropped out of sight.

Graybeard moved again, reloading his rifle as he ran. His toe caught in a root and he went sprawling, his rifle burying its muzzle in the sand. A yell of triumph came from the mouth of the canyon as Graybeard tried to get up. Five men broke from cover and raced up the canyon.

Al moved his Winchester. But it was none of his fight. He had troubles enough of his own.

Graybeard struggled to his feet and snatched up his own rifle, trying desperately to poke the dirt from the muzzle. Sand spurted about his feet from rifle shots. He reversed his rifle and gripped the barrel. He spread his feet apart. His beard stuck out pugnaciously. Like a damned old buffalo bull waiting for a ring of wolves to close in, thought Al.

Al squeezed back on his trigger, taking up the slack. For a moment more he hesitated. He had bitten off a big chaw in coming into the Grindstones at all. He might bite off a bigger one. He heard the old man's defiant yell.

Al shrugged and squeezed the trigger. His slug rapped into the earth just in front of the leading runner. His second slug tore the heel off the right boot of the next man. His third slug whispered past the third runner's head. All five of them sprinted for cover as Al's slugs rapped about their racing feet.

Graybeard dived behind a rock. He dropped the breech-block of his Sharps and blew a blast of air through the barrel.

Quickly he loaded, glanced up at Al's position, then fired toward the mouth of the canyon. A slug from that direction tore the tip from Al's left ear. He swung up his Winchester.

"Damn you," he said tightly as he fired at a patch of checkered shirt showing behind a shoulder of rock.

Checkered Shirt pitched forward with

the limpness of the dead, and crashed to the floor of the canyon. Al never heard the blast of the rifle that sent a bullet rapping against the side of his own head. He fell forward into a murky well of darkness. . . .

Something wet touched his lips. He opened his eyes. A burning thirst gripped at his throat. He clutched weakly at the canteen held in front of his face.

"Take it easy, bub!"

Graybeard hastily drew back the canteen. Then he placed it to Al's lips and let him sip a little. Al groaned and gingerly touched the side of his head. A bandage swathed his skull.

He looked about. They were in a deep cup of a valley. Silver moonlight sparkled from the rocks. Rusty nickered from where he was tethered to a mesquite. A gaunt mule stood beside him. Al looked up at Graybeard.

"Well?" he asked.

Graybeard grinned maliciously. "You got a thick skull, bub."

"The name is Al Forrest, Gramps!"

"Don't you call me Gramps!"

"What's your handle then?"

"Sim. Sim Pastor." Graybeard took a swig of water and wiped his mouth with a dirty sleeve.

"Go easy on the wet stuff, Sim. Ain't much of it around here."

Sim snorted. "Not for them as is damn fools enough to come in here not knowing the lay of the land. Plenty water in the Grindstones if you know where to find it."

Al sat up and braced himself against a saddle. He eyed the old man. "You mind telling me what that little fracas was about?"

Old Sim squatted back on his heels and looked at Al shrewdly. "Couple of boys thought I knew where the Lost Ghost Mine is. Figured I'd lead 'em to it."

"And do you?"

SIM slowly drew up his Sharps. The long barrel swung easily and pointed at Al's belly.

"Maybe. Maybe not. What were *you* doing in the Grindstones?"

Al's right hand clawed down. The old man shook his head. "I cached your Winchester and Colt, bub. Set tight."

Al shrugged. "You hold all the aces, Gramps."

Sim smiled, but in the old fellow's granite-chip eyes was no mirth. "Yore damned right I do. Now rest easy, sonny."

"All right. So I *was* lookin' for the Lost Ghost Mine."

Sim's eyes narrowed. "Why here?"

"As good a place as any."

Sim snorted.

"I suppose *you* know where it is?"

Sim lowered the Sharps. "I was with the Kelso Party here in Seventy-two."

Al's heart gave a great leap. He tried not to show any interest. "The Kelso Party? The bunch the 'Paches jumped before they found the mine? Nobody got away from that mess, Gramps."

Sim relaxed enough to tap his chest with a spatulate finger. His beard waggled pugnaciously. "*This* hombre did."

"That was ten years ago. Seems to me you took your time coming back."

Sim grinned. "Maybe I did. But I'm finding it this time, 'Paches or no."

Al sat up. "You dealing me in?"

Pastor spat. "Might. I could use a man handy with a gun."

"What's the split?"

"One-quarter."

Al shook his head. "Fifty-fifty, old-timer."

Sim's finger curled about the rifle's trigger. "Look, Bub. I hold all the cards. I know the water-holes. I know the 'Paches. I can leave you here to rot. One-quarter or nothin'."

There was no easiness in the old man's tone. He had fought to hold his secret. He would fight again.

"All right," said Al. "When do we start?"

"Tonight. Now!"

Al led Rusty up the deep canyon. He felt half-naked without his guns, but the old man had slung them to his mule saddle. Al looked back. Sim was plodding along with the flat-footed, bent-kneed

stride of the veteran prospector. The Sharps pointed at Al's back.

The moon hung in a dark blue sky. Deep shadows filled the sides of the canyon. A cool wind whispered through the brush. Al felt as if it were all a wild dream from which he would awaken, thirsty and lost. He plodded on through the long hours of the night.

At dawn they stopped in a deep draw that cut up the side of a wide, barren valley. Al tethered the animals far up the draw in a clump of juniper, and watered them sparingly from the old man's huge canteen. Sim motioned Al to follow him. They holed up in a shallow cave that afforded a wide view of the valley.

Al dropped off to sleep leaving the old man squatted by the cave entrance, cradling his Sharps and studying the landmarks that thrust rough shoulders up against the false dawn.

For three days they worked their way into the rugged hills that in time gave way to mountains, sharp and jagged, split by great upheavals of the past. Saguaro raised gaunt arms against the skies. Cholla cactus lashed at their boots. Thick-bodied rattlers slithered away from their crunching feet.

It was a place of damnation—a barren wilderness that was frightening in it's stark reality. But Sim Pastor drove Al on as though he were a pack animal. Never a word did he utter about the trail.

An uneasiness born of the old man's determination and cold eyes took hold of Al. Time and time again he tried to work the old fellow into a position where he could hit him hard enough to yank the Sharps away from him, but Sim was as wary as a deer. The big-bored rifle always covered Al's every move.

THE desert rat never seemed to sleep. He was awake when Al went to asleep and when Al awoke Sim was wide awake and ready to move. Al grew to hate the sight of the icy eyes and waggling beard. He cursed his own weakness, and the old man's rawhide constitution.

Worst of all were the biting jibes Sim leveled at Al when he felt as though he could go no further. Time and time again his big hands balled up to take one good belt at Sim but he never got the chance to smash him down.

The evening of the third day Al was sure they were hopelessly lost, yet the old man seemed to know where he was going. They holed up behind a high ledge of rock that ran transversely along the steep sloping wall of a canyon.

Sim disappeared, and returned with his big canteen full to the cap. Al drank deeply and eyed Sim as the old man swilled at the canteen in turn.

"'Bout time you did some talking, Sim," he said quietly. "I've had enough of this."

Sim wiped his mouth with his sleeve in a gesture Al had grown to hate. "What you aim to do about it, sonny? You aim to walk back to town with a Sharps slug in your belly?"

Al spat. "I'd like to wrap that damned rifle about your thick head, Gramps!"

Sim grinned coldly. "Don't try, sonny. You want to pull out now? I'll let you take your guns and horse. Go on."

Al hooked his thumbs in his belt. "I'm in for some of that gold, Sim."

"Then shut your mouth! We're halfway there now."

Al felt cold sweat trickle down from his armpits. The old man had been sweeping the landscape constantly with his eyes all day long. He had stopped many times as though taking bearings, but never a word had he said, up until now, about their being anywhere near the lost mine.

Al turned away from the belligerent desert rat. He looked out over the valley. There was a split peak that should mean something to him. The drunken prospector who had told him about the lost mine had mentioned something about a split peak. But the man's words had been lost to Al in a haze of memories. The slug that had creased his skull had wiped some of the directions from his mind. Yet the split peak should mean something.

He turned to Sim. "I've changed my mind, Sim. I'm pulling out."

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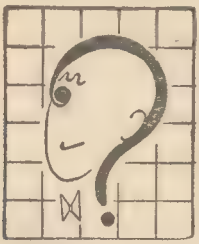

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To one in whom love dwells, all the world are brothers.
—Buddhist text

For a long moment the suspicious gray eyes held his. Then Sim Pastor shrugged. "All right. Your guns are empty. They's cartridges in your saddle-bags. I'll give you my extry canteen. Strike to the west over them low hills. You'll hit the Yavapai Wells stage road in a day. Go on, sonny." He grinned that malicious grin.

Al picked up Rusty's reins.

"Take this canteen," said Sim. He handed it to Al. *"Hasta luego, amigo."* There was something hidden in his words.

Al led Rusty forward. He glanced back. Sim was squatted beside his mule.

Al stepped up on a flat rock and looked down into the valley. His blood ran cold. He cursed and dropped behind the rock. He slapped Rusty on the rump and shoved against the roan to get him off the skyline. "Damn you!" he cursed Sim.

Down the valley he had seen a file of horsemen. Horsemen with thick manes of hair bound with strips of cloth. Horsemen who rode with keen eyes searching every inch of the valley. Apaches!

Sim laughed harshly in his throat. "Go on, bub," he jeered, "just over them hills is the Yavapai Wells Road. You blind bat! Didn't you see them smoke signals?"

Al wiped the icy sweat from his forehead. A wild urge to kill the old man surged up in him. He reached for his Winchester.

Sim got to his feet. "I'll tell you when to load that, Al. They haven't seen us. Get down."

The Apaches dismounted and made camp on a shoulder of rock that jutted out across the valley. A thin wisp of smoke rose from a fire. Within an hour two more parties of bucks rode into the camp. The sun flashed for a second on the brass trim of a sentry's weapon high on a butte across the valley.

AL CAUGHT the movement of another warrior as he took his position on a shoulder of rock that almost overlooked their hideout. He looked back at Sim.

"Now what? You've let them hole us in."

"Scared?"

Al cursed bitterly. "We came for gold —not for a slow death under a Chiricahua's knife, you damned old fool!"

Sim grinned. "Only way to get the gold is to come in here. We're not a mile from the mine."

Al looked away quickly. For some time he had had a feeling that the old man was not too sure. And abruptly the drunken prospector's words came to him as he riffled through the leaves of his memory.

He had said: "A split peak. Beyond the peak a narrow canyon marked by flash flood driftwood fifty feet over your head. At the end of the canyon a towering butte. Around the base of the butte you'll hit a faint trail made by the old Spanish miners. Follow the trail to where a cliff hangs over the trail. A deep shadow forms there at dawn. Only time you can see it. That's it—the Lost Ghost Mine! But be careful, amigo. The trail is marked by the bones of fools that wanted the gold. It's sacred Apache country. Swarms with Chiricahuas like ants on honey."

Al inched forward and looked down on the warriors. They were sitting about their fire, secure in the belief no white man would enter their country. It was death for the white-eyes to enter there.

Al spoke over his shoulder. "Three bucks coming up here, Sim. Coming fast!"

The old man's feet grated on the earth. He came up beside Al and cocked his Sharps. Al rolled quickly over. His right boot caught the old man alongside the jaw. Sim gasped and dropped the Sharps. Al's foot slammed down on it as his right fist connected solidly against Sim's chin.

Sim went sprawling. He clawed for his sheath knife. Al straightened him with a left and followed with a right cross. The knife slashed along his right forearm, slitting the shirt sleeve and drawing blood. Sim, like an angry cat, spat and leaped back. He was as tough as rawhide. Many a man would have been down for the count.

Sim danced about, spitting blood and

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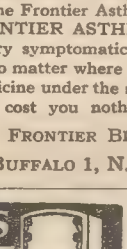

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threatening Al with the knife. The blade flicked out. Al cursed as it bit into his left hand. He snatched up a rock and threw it. As Sim ducked sideward and his boots rolled on the gravel, Al came in like a leaping cougar. His fist smashed against Sim's jaw. The old man went backward and his skull hit against a ridge of rock. He lay still.

Al wiped the sweat from his face and looked over the ledge. The Apaches were still by their fire. He pulled the knife away from the old man's grasp and unloaded the big Sharps.

"Stubborn old cuss," he muttered aloud as he bound his right forearm with a strip of his bandanna.

Swiftly he loaded his Winchester, then his Colt. He grinned with relief as he slid the hand gun into its well-worn holster. It was like meeting a long-lost friend. He slung the canteen from Rusty's saddlehorn and looked down into the valley. Long shadows chased themselves across it's floor. The Apaches were still sitting tight. He glanced at the old man. Sim was like a damned old vinegaroon. Let him stew in his own juice. He was too deadly for Al.

Al led the roan along behind the ledge, then down a long natural corridor that shielded him from the view of the Chiricahuas. Darkness shrouded his movements. He wrapped strips of cloth about any metal that might clink against rock and softly worked his way out of the dangerous valley. He glanced back once more at the shadowed ledge where old Sim Pastor lay. "Stubborn old cuss," he said again, as he headed for the split peak.

BY DAWN Al had reached the narrow canyon beyond the split peak. Driftwood was wedged in crannies high over his head. Flash floods would fill that narrow corridor with a hell of racing, surging flood water.

By noon, he reached a towering butte. His water was low.

Heat hung sullenly in that waterless land like a great blanket. He picked up a faint trail and rounded a hummock of

rock. He stopped short. The bones of men gleamed whitely against the dun earth!

He eased his belt and squatted beside the relics. A skull grinned sardonically up at him. A dried leather belt was twisted amongst the ribs of the skeleton. He dragged it free. The name "KELSO" was burned crudely into the leather.

Old Sim had been pretty close to the mine. But his memory had become hazy with the years.

This was a perfect place for an ambush. Al could picture the Chiricahuas following the gold-hungry men of that disarmed party into the canyon and lacing them in with a hell of rifle fire.

He tossed the belt down, but as he led Rusty forward his hand hung close to his Colt. A cliff leaned over the trail. He hurried forward eagerly.

Al made his simple camp in a nest of rocks and shared some of his water with the roan. He tried to sleep, but it was no use. All night long he sat hunched against the chill until the canyon began to fill with gray light. Then he checked his Winchester and followed the dim trail.

To his left, the bare wall was beginning to show up clearly. There was no shadow. He looked to his right. His heart gave a great leap, and his breath came short. A deep shadow lay against the canyon wall.

He tethered Rusty and worked his way up the crumbling slope slipping and sliding in the loose talus until he reached the canyon wall covered by the shadow. In the darkest part of the shadow there was a squared patch that seemed darker than the rest. As he moved into the darkness, a cool breeze swept about him, chilling the sweat on his face. On each side of him ancient timbers braced the walls.

A faint sound sent him darting back, clawing out his Colt. A bat sailed soundlessly over his head, and he grinned weakly. Scouting about for a clump of grass, he twisted it into a rude torch, lit it, and went into the mine holding the torch high. Shadows flitted away from him. He kicked against something metallic. It

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was a miner's pick with a broken handle.

On and on he went in the darkness. Suddenly he stopped. Mounded against the wall was a heap of something foreign to the earthy shaft. He held the torch close, whistled. Half a dozen leather sacks lay carelessly strewn atop a box.

He placed the torch on a ledge above the box and picked one of them up hesitantly. With nervous fingers he undid the heavy sack. A stream of gold dust, mixed with small nuggets, flowed about his worn boots.

"I'll be a sonuvabitch," he said hoarsely, "It's the stuff all right!"

Gathering up the sacks, he thrust them beneath his shirt. There was no time to waste getting out of there. He had a small fortune in gold. It was enough. He didn't want to push his luck too far looking for more.

By noon he had reached the split butte. Cautiously he surveyed the valley. A movement caught his eye. An Apache buck was belly-flat against a rock, sighting a rifle. The rifle cracked.

High on the side of the valley a spurt of red flame was followed by the heavy roar of a large caliber rifle. The buck rolled over, kicked spasmodically, then lay still. Al picked out half a dozen more of the Chiricahuas behind rock barricades looking up at the side of the valley.

One of them fired. A man stood up for a fraction of a second and fired. As the smoke drifted off he dropped from sight. Al grinned. There was no mistaking that gray beard. Old Sim Pastor was holed up.

FOR an hour Al lay still, watching the long-range battle and also searching the slopes for a way over the hills to the Yavapai Wells Road. At last he moved cautiously, leading Rusty behind outcroppings of rock and clumps of stunted oaks and junipers, until at last he found a long draw that would keep him out of the Apaches' sight until he topped the hills.

His journey was punctuated by the crack of the Chiricahuas's rifles and the heavier report of the big Sharps. When

he tethered Rusty, he patted the gold-filled saddle-bags and trailed his Winchester as he worked his way up to where he could view the one-sided fight.

The Apaches had moved in on Sim. Two of them were only a hundred yards from his position. His firing was slower. Low on ammunition, or wounded.

"Serves him right," muttered Al.

He hunched forward. Eight braves were moving in on old Sim. He was a plucky old devil. Al scratched his bristly face. He touched the stiff arm the old man's knife had left him with. To hell with Sim! He had given Al sheer hell on the trip in. He had almost sent Al into the hands of the Chiricahuas.

Yet he was a tough old turkey. Too tough for a pack of mangy Apaches to finish off.

Al levered a cartridge into the chamber of his Winchester. The front sight settled on the back of a squat buck who was peering through a mesquite bush in Sim's direction. The Winchester cracked flatly. The buck never knew what tore the life from him.

Al's next shot sent a warrior rolling behind a rock, with a shattered arm. He shot a warrior out from behind a juniper.

Sim's Sharps took up the fight. An unwary warrior looked up to see where the new marksman was concealed. The Sharps sent him lifeless down the slope. The rest of the bucks broke for their tethered ponies. The Sharps and the Winchester crackled steadily. Two more Chiricahuas died on the way to their mounts. The last two lashed their ponies down the valley and out of sight behind a shoulder of rock.

Al sat on a rock as old Sim hobbled down the slope. Al's Winchester settled on the old man's lean belly.

"Howdy, Gramps," he said with a grin. "Little hot up there for an old man."

Sim spat. "I would of held them off, Sonny." His eyes narrowed. "You still in with me to get the gold?"

Al yawned. "No. Too much work."

Sim tied a bandanna about his left calf.

[*Turn page*]

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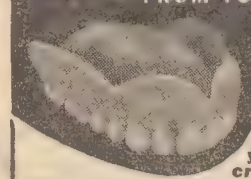

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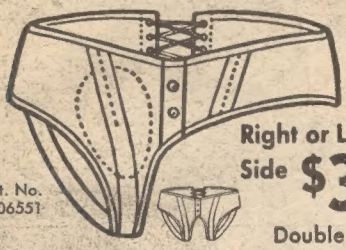

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"The buzzards nicked me." He eyed Al. "You get the stuff?"

Al nodded and eased the Winchester a little. "Get back, you ornery old goat."

Sim grinned.

"You wouldn't cut an old man out now, would you, Al?"

"Easy."

Sim sighed. "I figured as much." He sat down. "You sure pack a wallop, sonny. Put me to sleep for nigh an hour."

Al got up. "Come on, Gramps. No hard feelings. I'll cut you in for twenty-five per cent."

"Where you heading?"

"Tucson maybe. *Quien sabe?*"

Sim cleared his throat. "Plenty drinking likker there. Might be you'd want a man to have a few drinks with you for old time's sake?" Sim leered ingratiatingly.

Al shook his head and motioned the old man up the slope to where Rusty was. "Where's the mule?"

"'Paches got him."

Al laughed. "You're in a helluva mess, old-timer. No gold, no mule and no friends."

Sim's beard bristled. "You can go plumb to hell, bub! With your gold, too."

Five hours later they reached the winding ribbon of the stage road. Sim stopped and turned to look at Al.

"This the parting of the ways, bub?"

Al grinned. "I'm getting so used to you, you old vinegaroon, I'll have to take you with me."

"Not less'n I get my fifty per cent."

Al stuck out his hand. "It's a deal, Sim."

Sim scratched his beard. "You ain't such a bad hombre after all, bub. Besides I aim to stick close by you for a time. I'd like to see if I can lay one against that jaw of yours to make *you* sleep for an hour. Let's get on, amigo."

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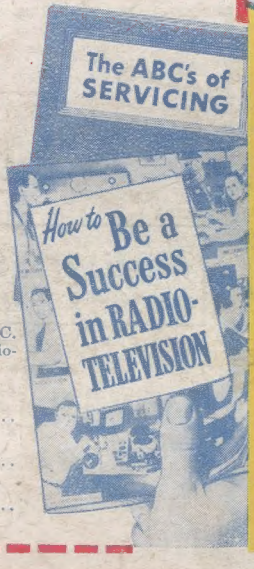

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